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SHOOT ME DEAD

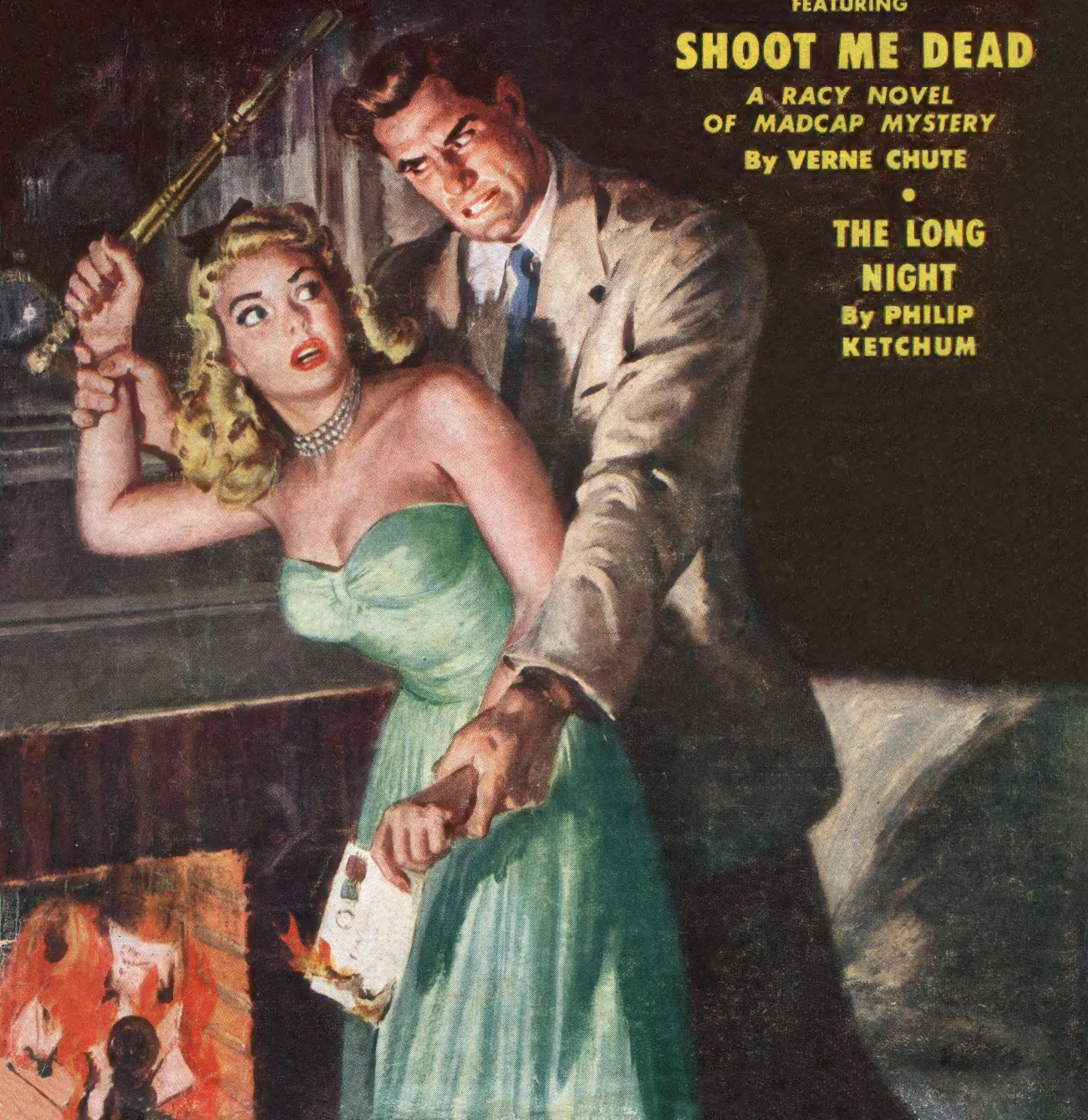
A RACY NOVEL
OF MADCAP MYSTERY

By VERNE CHUTE

•

THE LONG NIGHT

By PHILIP
KETCHUM



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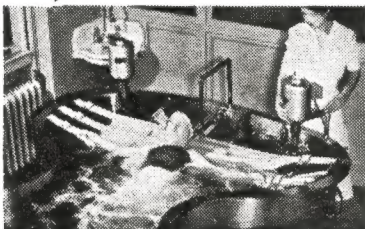
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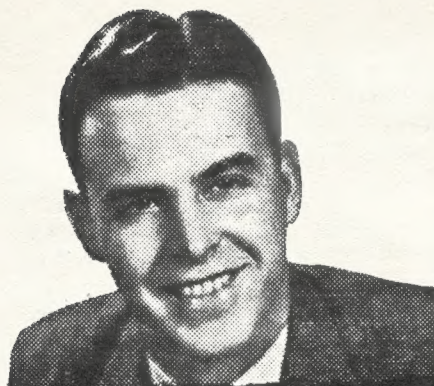
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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

THRILLING

DETECTIVE

Vol LXX, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

June, 1952

Featured Novel

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Alexander Samalman, Editor

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The Bloodhound Isn't Bloody



By WILLIAM CARTER

THERE are probably as many misconceptions about the bloodhounds as there are about any other animal. In the first place—to begin with—his name is really a misspelling. It should be a blooded hound.

Actually, the sorrowful-looking lop-eared dog is anything but a bloodily-disposed individual. He is, as a matter of fact, very much on the gentle side and makes an excellent pet for children. The “blood” in his name refers to the fact that he comes from a long line of pedigreed dogs.

Records of these canines go back through the ages. Way back in the ninth century the monks of St. Hubert's Abbey in France used to raise them.

Then these dogs, now almost altogether associated with prisons and prison camps, became almost the trademark of aristocracy. Families of nobility would vie with one another in trying to breed fine super-pure breeds. But the keen sense of smell of the hound was obviously so remarkable that it was inevitable that he should wind up in the role of the hunter. At first, though, he was used in running down deer and foxes. It was probably the feudal Scottish Lords that first made use of the bloodhounds in trailing bigger game—men. There was considerable bickering of a violent sort in those parts in those days and, when someone got the upper hand, he sometimes set his hounds after those who'd taken to the brush.

In this country, the bloodhounds first came into prominence in the tracking down of fugitive slaves. But a good many of these dogs were not true bloodhounds, but offspring of canines brought over here by the

early Conquistadors, a mixture of the ferocious war dog and the Spanish pointer.

These animals, who were found mainly in Cuba and South America, had been brought into the Southland during pre-Civil War days and they served to frighten the slaves. These hounds reverted to savage brutes when they were “put on trail” and a slave knew it was truly a matter of life and death to make a break for freedom with big “flesh-tearing” dogs available to track him down.

However, the true bloodhound will not aggressively harm his prey. Once he has cornered his quarry, he is content to just keep him at bay until his master arrives. Of course, the dog will resist any attempt that his quarry may make to escape. He is capable of inflicting damage in that event. But it's not in the dog's nature to be deliberately cruel.

Feats of bloodhounds tracking down their prey are legendary. They have been known to keep on the trail of their scent even though this trail has been crossed and recrossed by other men dozens of times. They not only pick up man odor that has brushed off on grass and leaves, but they've been known to scent their way to their quarry across many blocks of cold city pavements. Their remarkable gift is considered so well-nigh infallible that the fact that they have tracked down someone is admissible as evidence in some courts.

But there is one thing that can beat the bloodhounds—the clock. As a rule, if the trail is more than four hours old, the canine is hard put to follow it up. That's when a bloodhound really becomes sorrowful-looking.

Though a Manhunter, He's Really a Gentle Creature!



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Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

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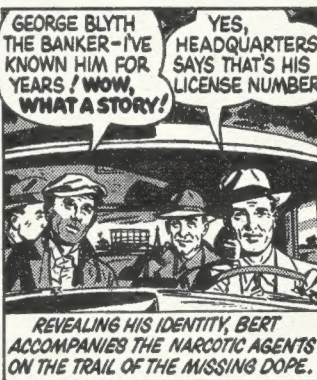
THAT'S 'BENNY THE HOPHEAD'! WONDER WHAT'S UP? LICENSE 062-451!

MASQUERADING AS A "SKID ROW" CHARACTER TO GATHER FEATURE MATERIAL FOR HIS NEWSPAPER, BERT EVANS, FAMOUS REPORTER, WITNESSES A PECULIAR HAPPENING...



THOUGHT YOU GAVE US THE SLIP- EH? HAND OVER THE DOPE!

I'VE QUIT PEDDLING IT. HE SLIPPED SOMETHING INTO A GIRL'S SEDAN... LICENSE NUMBER 062-451!



GEORGE BLYTH THE BANKER- I'VE KNOWN HIM FOR YEARS! WOW, WHAT A STORY!

YES, HEADQUARTERS SAYS THAT'S HIS LICENSE NUMBER

REVEALING HIS IDENTITY, BERT ACCOMPANIES THE NARCOTIC AGENTS ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING DOPE.



HEROIN! SORRY YOU'LL HAVE TO MAKE A STATEMENT AT HEADQUARTERS

IN MY CAR! WHAT A MESS!

TELL THE BOSS I HAVE HER PICTURE - A BEAUT!



MY PAPER WANTS MISS BLYTH'S PICTURE. MAY I DROP IT OFF AND SEE YOU AT HEADQUARTERS?

OKAY, BUT HURRY. WE NEED YOUR STATEMENT TO CLEAR MISS BLYTH



GREAT WORK. NOW SHED THAT 'SKID ROW' DISGUISE

YEAH, I SURE NEED A SHAVE



SAY, I GO FOR THIS BLADE OF YOURS! FOUR DAYS' STUBBLE GONE LIKE MAGIC!

THIN GILLETTES ARE ALWAYS KEEN AND EASY SHAVING



MAY I RETURN YOUR PICTURE TOMORROW, MISS BLYTH?

PLEASE DO?

CAN'T YOU MAKE IT AROUND SIX AND DINE WITH US?

HE'S HANDSOME

NARCOTIC BUREAU

ONE HOUR LATER...



BECAUSE THEY GIVE QUICK, EASY SHAVES EVERY TIME, THIN GILLETTES ARE AMERICA'S MOST POPULAR LOW-PRICE BLADES. FAR KEENER THAN ORDINARY BLADES, THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY... NEVER NICK OR SCRAPE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT



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CRIME CAPERS

THE CRIMINAL MIND is capable of many vagaries, some of which provide a chuckle for the busy sleuth. Here we've rounded up a few of the more colorful items that have spiced the current crime news.

A PHILADELPHIA POULTRY DEALER yelled lustily for help when two men held him up. But the cackling of hundreds of hens drowned out the cries and he lost \$900, which isn't chicken feed!

FARNHAM, CANADA, POLICE reported that a thief had raided an abandoned army camp and carted away everything but the kitchen sinks. Then they revised the report. The sinks were gone too.

IN DEDHAM, MASS., two gunmen, who were surprised by a citizen in his home, not only slugged him in the jaw and removed \$1,000 worth of property from his premises, but made him push their stalled auto until it started.

AFTER FOUR BURGLARIES in his church, the Rev. Earl Hamlett, of Abilene, Tex., announced in the papers: "We do not keep our collection money in the church safe. Pickings there are either very slim or non-existent and never worth the trouble, regardless."

A FORT WORTH, TEX., MAN, arrested for burglary, explained that he was about to be tried on another theft charge and "needed the money for attorney fees."

ST. THOMAS, CANADA, police have been looking for the thief who stole a 200-lb granite tombstone.

A BURGLAR whom she discovered looting her dresser drawers forced a New York woman to name the value of each piece of jewelry he came across so that he could select those worth stealing.



BALTIMORE POLICE have been looking for a literal-minded thief. He was the one who stole from a used-car lot an auto that had on it the sign: "A Steal."

A WOMAN WHO USED the phone in a booth at a Philadelphia drug store talked so whole-heartedly that she walked out later without being aware that while she was at it two holdup men had robbed the store of \$45.

BANDITS ROBBED A CHELSEA, MASS., supermarket of \$2200 but they were considerate enough to call up police and tell them that they'd locked the proprietor in a refrigerator so that he wouldn't get too chilly.

DALLAS SLEUTHS had a hard time trying to catch a bandit, who robbed seven motorists at gunpoint. He changed clothes after every robbery.

A MAN LEFT his stalled car on a Washington highway and when he returned to it, these items had been stolen: five tires, wheels, two hubcaps, two robes, two wiper blades, tools and their box, skid and tow chains, a pint of brake fluid, two spark plugs, distributor points, a can of oil, quart of anti-freeze, wheel grease, driving gloves, defroster fans, two mirrors and the radio aerial.

A FALLS CITY, NEB., JUDGE fined a man who swiped a slot machine \$35—and then fined the man he stole it from \$1000 for owning it.

IN BERKLEY, CALIF., a man was warned by police to quit tying his boxer dog to a parking meter.

THE MISTAKE that a Hollywood, Calif., citizen made was kneeling in church at the wrong time. Officers R. W. Wells and V. R. Cochran said they found him kneeling before the church safe, with pliers, a crowbar and no prayer book.

—Harold Helfer

"Stand still—and keep
your hands in sight!"



Shoot me DEAD

A Novel by VERNE CHUTE

CHAPTER I

TRAGIC NARRATIVE

HILL STREET at Third, in downtown Los Angeles, was a busy, pedestrian-and-car-filled canyon with an added duty to perform. Today the breeze from the coast was using the street as a channel to push the gas-laden air over the hills where it could be dissipated in the desert.

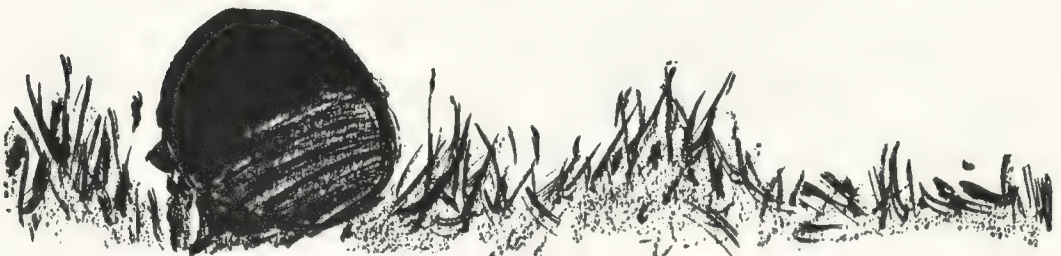
It was all right for Los Angeles, but it didn't help me any. My own troubles couldn't be dispatched as easily.

Bounding up the stairs, I reached the fourth floor of the Hill Street building before

I remembered they made elevators. I was in that much of a hurry. Now that I didn't need it, I could hear the mechanism of the lift banging some place down the hall. The operational noise and subsequent smashing stop was nearly as bad as the crash of motor cars that still dinned in my ears. The noise sounded exactly as though Miss Fender-crusher were at work again.

I found the detective office with some difficulty. It was far back in the dark hallway. It had no mahogany door and there were no

*When Robert Shelley Entfield has his fenders smashed, he doesn't
let mere killers and crooks stop him from pursuing the culprit!*



An Indignant Englishman Almost Turns Crimedom

gold letters. There was only a dusty name on glass:

WIDE AWAKE DETECTIVE AGENCY
JAMES MADISON
WALK IN

Standing there catching my breath, it suddenly occurred to me that there was no hurry now. The day already was ruined. The police had done what they could, which hadn't been much. The thing that had happened to my car was a very small matter to them. They couldn't know that the search for the guilty persons would lead to the uncovering of a crime of the greatest magnitude. One which for sheer audacity and the fantastic amount of money involved could top anything in the annals of American Crime.

I opened the door of the office. There was no receptionist. No ankle-deep rugs. No overstuffed chairs in the outer office for a client. There was no client.

I moved past a low table piled knee-deep with back issues of throw-away magazines. A door stood open. The scene in the inner office was a little more encouraging; there were signs of occupancy.

At once and at the same time, I could see and hear the proprietor of the Wide Awake Agency. He was snoring in his swivel chair, his feet favoring a battered flat-topped desk that must have been in the Flood. His shoes needed half-soling.

Mr. James Madison sighed ponderously; he even smiled a little as though at peace with the world. I moved inside.

THE harsh noise I thought was coming from James Madison's throat wasn't coming from there at all. It came from the window. Louder now, it sounded like a chain being dragged across a wooden trestle. The office darkened as the window blotted out; the darkening agency moved past in an odd, diagonal manner. Then light streamed into the office window again.

Immediately the whole thing repeated itself, except the shadow came slanting downhill instead of going up. The clanking, drag-

ging noise continued for a few seconds, then stopped altogether.

"Don't let that thing bother you," a throaty, masculine voice said:

I swung around. My man had come to life. He was a rugged individual, believe me. He had blue eyes and a smile that was a very real thing despite lowered brows which were as bushy as a coal miner's god.

"That's Angels' Flight," he explained. "You get used to it after a while. My rates are twenty per day. No civil rights. No divorce stuff."

I stared at him. Shoot me dead! Without asking a question I had all the facts. I took out a roll of bills.

"I am most happy to learn about the funicular cable line," I said. "Also that your rates are within my means, Mr. Madison. Financially embarrassed as I am, I nevertheless have fifty dollars to spend. I wish to spend it all in locating a pair of low persons who perpetuated a dastardly crime against me." As an afterthought, I added: "I am applying because of your advertisement downstairs."

"Yeah?" he said as though he didn't believe me. Lifting one brow he took his feet down off the desk to let me place the folded money in a spot in juxtaposition to where his feet had been. "You talk," he said. "I'll listen."

"Thank you, sir," I told him. "Kindly bear with me, I beg of you. My name is Robert Shelley Enfield, and I am a salesman. My poor lot and present unemployment, I assure you, are not a true picture of my capabilities. All I ask is that these uncouth persons be found and that I have a speedy and just retribution."

He seemed startled by what I told him. Then he nodded and said under his breath: "All right, Jane Austen."

But I had heard him. Taken back, I answered him coldly.

"The name, as I have just told you, sir, is Robert Shelley Enfield." I added, "I was not aware that your eyes were so bad you failed to recognize me as one of the masculine sex."

Topsy-Turvy in Quest of a Hit-and-Run Driver!

He gave the faintest of smiles. "You always talk like that?"

"Not always, Mr. Madison. At times it often pains me that I cannot disseminate the language as I hear it. To employ your services, is it necessary that I use a more colloquial tongue? I suppose also you wish a history of myself?"

waited until they had come and gone before turning back to Mr. Madison. It seemed best to clear up some points before proceeding.

"Mr. Madison," I said, "by virtue of being born in the United States while my mother was here on a visit, I am an American citizen. My father was in the diplomatic service with a residency in Washington at the



My hand trembling, I said,
"I thought we were pals"

He nodded absently, his eyes on my money again. Then we both looked toward the window. The rattle of cables was beginning again. Hypnotically I was drawn to the window.

I received a better view of the funicular railway this time. The tracks ran from Hill Street up the steep grade to Olive. I saw two miniature street cars counterbalanced on a cable, but of course there was no motorman or conductor. The cars were smaller than the regular trams but they contained advertising above the seats like their bigger brothers. I

time. My mother, I sadly report, is now in her grave. My early schooling was in Southwick in the Thames Valley under the tutelage of the headmaster of Bitterclay House. The headmaster's father had taught at Bitterclay House before him. He would have been extremely offended at my father had I been sent elsewhere for my schooling."

Mr. Madison nodded his shaggy head, seemingly intent on listening to me.

"The purist style assimilated at Bitterclay," I went on, "was not remedied by a stay at Eton during my master's prolonged illness

and at his subsequent demise. Yet Eton was and is steeped with tradition. If, sir, you are interested in a historical footnote, Eton was founded before our America was discovered—"

I LET my voice trail away. It suddenly occurred to me that I had come into the office to hire a private detective and not to give the story of my life as though I were a domestic seeking employment.

"I am here to engage—"

"Sure, sure," he said, raking in my fifty dollars. He counted the money over twice. "Think no more about it. The case is as good as broken." He put the money down and sifted a look at it through his fingers. "Go ahead, Mr.—ah—Enfield. Let's hear your gripe, then we'll get to work."

"My gripe? What did you say, sir?"

He smiled at me. "Your trouble. Tell me about it."

Nothing loath, I continued. "Here, sir, is the picture. Early this morning an angel from heaven telephoned and asked if I were Robert Shelley Enfield. I was, obviously. This point established, I was informed that the new motor car for which I had waited so long had arrived and was ready. It is now a matter of history that my own motor was deemed of sufficient value for a down payment and that I drove away from the agency with a motor car that was the quintessence of all motor cars. New from petrol tank to bally-duster, it was a two-toned coupé in rich cream and brown. White sidewall pneumatics, chrome fog lamps, a decolite radiator ornament and twin horns that mewed like contented cows. It was a motor car, Mr. Madison! Shoot me dead!"

Inspired by the picture before my eyes, I went on.

"My first stop, Mr. Madison, was the House of Handley, purveyors of monogrammed and crested stationery. They had made it quite plain that as soon as I received my new car they would happily add me to their sales force. My territory would be Beverly Hills West. As I drove westward on Seventh, following the line of lesser motor cars, no one would have known that virtually my last farthing was in the petrol tank."

I looked at my host. One eye was open, looking at me quizzically.

"The fifty dollars, sir," I said, "is from quite another fund. It's the last of my savings. . . ."

"Parking outside the executive office of the House of Handley, I left a large parking space in the front and rear of my motor car. I was half intoxicated by the sharp, pungent smell which is peculiar to all new motors, and this one was super. Nothing like it in old Albion!"

"Upstairs, while waiting to see the sales manager, I looked out the window and down.

"A long, black motor car was backing into the curb in front of mine. A white-gloved feminine hand thrust from the driver's compartment as though to better guide the big shape into the parking space. Fascinated, I watched. She turned too short the first time, too long the second. Then she waved her hand angrily as though somebody in the compartment with her was telling her how to drive. The third time the big motor roared back in a mad rush and I closed my eyes.

"A crash! All Los Angeles must have heard the sound. Then I was staring down again. Rooted to the spot, I was hypnotized—but I could still see. A tall, dark-haired girl jumped out of the offending motor car, her face white with anger. A big man got out on the other side and came rearwards. He looked at the crumpled damage. It struck him funny and he—laughed!"

"He said something to the girl then, and she ran into a drug store as though to telephone. At his request a couple of bystanders took their places on my crushed bumper and began to jump up and down.

"By this time I was leaping toward the carpeted stairs. Somebody called from the manager's office, but I didn't even turn. That hideous laugh from below was all I had time for.

"I reached the street just in time to see the big car pull away from mine—and keep going. But I caught the license number. The bobbies came then, and I gave them the number.

"James—do you mind if I call you James?—the officers were sympathetic. They had this same number listed on a printed card

they carried on the windshield. The plates had been stolen from a hot-rod motor reported missing by a young lad who lived in the Silver Lake district. The officers looked at the front of my motor car, then one of them shook his head sadly and said it certainly had been a classy employment."

CHAPTER II

MISS FENDER-CRUSHER



I FINISHED my tragic narrative and looked at James. His peaceful face filled me with consternation. Was he asleep? The small cable cars came past the window again, and he started and rubbed his eyes.

"Resting them," he explained. "You were saying?"

Nonplussed, I repeated what the bobbies had said about my motor being a classy employment.

The rugged individual looked puzzled. Then he smiled.

"Oh," he said, "you mean a classy *job*."

I nodded gravely. "I assured the officers I deeply appreciated their work in my behalf, that I recognized them as men of quality and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they would do all in their power to apprehend the villainous characters who owned the black sedan, but that I myself would be lying cold in my grave ere I gave up the search."

"What did they say to that?"

"The officers looked a little stirred by my speech. Stirred and uneasy. Then they drove away rapidly, with their wireless directing them to a residential alley where a man was attempting to shoot another man with a dog! If I had heard this weird bit of grammatical construction correctly it was amusing, James. I reminded myself to laugh at it when I got the time."

James laughed a little for me. He'd perhaps heard more while "resting his eyes" than I'd given him credit for.

"Yeah, Robert—Bob," he said, as though trying out my given name also. He shook his

head slightly, then said "Robert" again as though he liked that better. "We'll find the hit-and-run artists, Robert."

A knock came on the door. James got up and came around me and filled the aperture with his short, heavy bulk. He listened to someone for a moment before saying:

"The job's filled. . . Yeah, call me in a month or two."

He closed the door carefully and came back to the desk.

"James," I said, "I've just thought of something else. The pneumatics. That low person had white sidewalls like mine. A man said he noticed them. Another man thought the big car was a Cadillac."

"What kind of tires?"

"Monarch Cushion Cords." After he had written this down, I said: "James, you have been very kind to listen to the tale of my vicissitudes, and believe me, I am not insensible to the honor you pay me."

It was with no little dismay that I saw James reach under his desk and pull out a round gallon flagon half filled with a red, watery liquid. He nodded toward the water cooler.

"Toss over a paper cup," he said.

When I did so, he opened a drawer in his desk and brought out a water tumbler encrusted a rust-red on its inner surface. First he filled the paper cup until it glowed redly, then he looked at me before he filled his own encrusted glass.

"Like a broken-in pipe," he explained. "The longer the glass is left unwashed the better the wine tastes. Wine is happiest when not in contact with a foreign substance."

I waited courteously for him to finish his discourse, which included several anecdotes.

"James," I said then, "you have told me more than I care to know about the propensities of wine drinking. If you will remember, the reason I am here is to obtain assistance in apprehending the low fellows who blighted my life, one male and one female of the species."

Nodding, James Madison pushed the paper cup over to me.

"Excuse me," I said, "I do not use intoxicants." I felt that perhaps this might be a good time to let him know for once and for

all my opinion on the matter. "I am not a transcendentalist or a moralist, James, yet I have never deemed it necessary to prove my manhood by the use of either intoxicants or tobacco."

He looked startled. "My dear Robert, I was not aware that you classified the life blood of California as an intoxicant. . . Heck! Now you've got me talking that way. But look, the juice of the grape is not an intoxicant, rather a tonic. Divinely produced, aided and abetted by the hand of man and suffused with California sunshine, it is a gift to modern civilization. A tonic. No more than that, Robert."

"In that case, James, I shall consume a small portion."

I did so, wafting it off in a manner which is called "neat" in the parlance of those habitually using intoxicant beverages.

JAMES MADISON refilled my paper cup dreamily, and then his own, which had become empty.

"Robert," he said, picking up the fifty dollars in currency again, "in view of your payment to the office, the case is hereby opened. Consider your man, and woman, practically apprehended." He took a five-dollar bill away from its fellows and put this in his pocket. He smiled at me. "Now, what you need is a job, and what I need is an assistant. You're hired. You go to work in the morning on the Enfield Case. Ten o'clock will be early enough. Here's your first week's wages, in advance."

He tossed forty-five dollars out of my fifty back to me. I picked the money up mechanically.

James took another drink, looked toward the window and put the bottle and glass away. I emptied my own glass without knowing what I was doing. Then I caught myself, and pulled up sharply. This was getting out of line. It was a far cry from apprehending the owner of the black car.

Firmly, I told James so. He listened placidly.

"Leave it to me," he said. "Don't worry about it. I'll go out and search the air currents. I can smell crime like a hound dog can a red fox. See you in the morning. If you

want to watch the "Flight" go up and down, help yourself. Pull the door shut when you come out, Robert."

Then he was gone, setting the night latch on the outside door as he went. I stared after him, feeling very foolish indeed. I had come to give the Wide Awake Detective Agency a job, and James Madison had given me one instead! Shoot me dead!

Outside the window the cable began dragging again. While watching the cars, I returned the money to my wallet. Afterward I felt strange in the office, all alone.

The telephone rang. I let it ring several times before I went around the desk where the telephone was stuck on an accordion affair. Enconced in Mr. Madison's swivel chair, I pulled the instrument to me and gave a tentative hello into the mouthpiece.

"Look, Madison," a gruff voice said, "we've been waiting three months for that month's rent we let you skip. You said you'd take care of it on the first."

My keen detective eye caught sight of the calendar pad on the desk. The tenth of the month had a red circle around it. Disguising my voice in brusqueness—I had once studied with the Countryside Players for a stage career—I said:

"You mean the tenth day of the month."

The voice came over the wire again. "All right, all right, Madison. The tenth. We're making a special consideration for you, your being such an old tenant. Only yesterday we could have rented your office. . . By the way, have you got another pigeon to do your work for you, or have you set the trap yet?"

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled into the mouthpiece.

The phone clicked dead and I returned the receiver to the hook.

I opened the drawer and took out James' wine-encrusted glass. There was a red-rimmed statement upon which the glass had so appropriately set. "Dayley's Liquor Store" headed the itemized account, but the items were listed as cigarettes, cigars and ginger ales.

I brought the glass jug of California's lifeblood to the desk top. The label had a smaller stamp on it, also "Dayley's Liquor Store."

Filling Mr. Madison's glass with the red

liquor, I held it up to the light. I put my feet over on the adequate edge of the desk. Quaffing the tonic, I was surprised at its taste; it was better now. Perhaps Mr. Madison was right.

I brought a paper cup from the water cooler. Filled with brimming tonic, I matched it against the red liquid in the encrusted glass. Both, I will admit, tasted much better than they had heretofore. I tasted and retasted to be sure.

With extended foot I hooked the telephone to me again. This was the way Mr. Madison, the rugged individual, would have done it. The accordion extension brought the telephone close to my mouth.

I dialed a number and asked a girl if I might speak to Miss Alice Faire. It was necessary to do this, for Miss Alice's employer was not pleased to have her get calls.

After a long time Miss Alice was on the wire, and I knew smiling and happy. I could smell apple blossoms. Her voice was like Lana Turner's in a narrator-type picture, but Miss Alice Faire could out-sweater any sweater girl in the business. And she had the bluest eyes that ever came out of Hollywood High School.

I explained into the mouthpiece: "A situation of great moment kept me from filling my luncheon appointment with you at twelve. Kindly accept my humble excuses. I assure you, this unavoidable offense will not be repeated. If tonight will do as well, I should be happy to join you at the door of the office building where you are employed."

"At six, then? . . . The surprise?"

The surprise had been the motor car.

"I'm still keeping that until the right moment," I said hastily. "Have I been drinking? You know quite well, Miss Alice, that I never use intoxicants. . . . Yes, I have changed my employment. I will tell you about it at six. Your servant, madam."

Alice Faire liked that last little touch. She said it made her feel like a great lady, which I assured her she was. I would assure her again when I met her at six.

I sat there for another moment or two with the quiet telephone in my hand. My own troubles had faded before the vision of incredibly blue eyes and apricot hair. And if

her sweater looked the way it did it was not due to artificial means. Miss Alice was entirely honest.

I called the motor car agency. The damage on the new car came to two hundred and sixty-five dollars. I had a little over forty dollars.

I got up and tiptoed out of the office. As I clicked the lock behind me, the Angels Flight was making another trip up and down. I felt so much like a trespasser that I walked down the stairs instead of taking the lift. . . .

I was still thinking of Miss Alice when I arrived at the office building on Sixth Street. I was already steeling myself for the first sight of her. Each time it was the same—seeing her made my knees a little weak. She was blonde and as blue-eyed and dainty as a French doll. There was a perpetual look of wonder in her eyes, as though she was forever surprised and pleased at what she saw.

When people looked at her they looked twice. The older men looked and smiled a little sadly as though recalling a pleasant episode of their youth; the younger men looked twice, just to be sure they had not missed anything. The women looked their twice, too, and because of it were twice as envious.

Perhaps tonight she would tell me about her new position. She had worked at it for a matter of some weeks. A sort of receptionist, she had said, upstairs on the fifth floor of the Equitable Building.

It wasn't quite six o'clock, yet my eyes already were tuned to a trim, little figure in a gray business suit, a white sweater when—

Only it wasn't Miss Alice's trim little figure that suddenly came before my vision. What I saw turned my heart hard and cold. A girl just crossing the street. *The girl.* Miss Fender-crusher in person!

Miss Fender-crusher was hurrying toward a taxi. Then I saw him—the man who had laughed! He was holding the door of the taxi open. While I was staring, the street signal turned—the wrong way for me. There was suddenly a wall of cars between the pair and me and then a wave of humanity almost swept me on across the street the way I didn't want to go.

I surged back against the stream, trying to keep the pair in sight. But the taxicab pulled

out from the curb, halted for another taxicab of like color and denomination and then sped away. At this time of the evening the streets were full of taxicabs, but most were occupied. I raced down the sidewalk, dodging through the pedestrians like a broken-field runner.

The pair didn't see me as I found and leaped into a taxicab that was cruising past looking for a fare. I told the driver I wanted to catch the cab straight ahead, that my sister was in it, that she was going to the wrong address, and I had to catch her.

I showed him a little money and he immediately entered into the spirit of the chase. He raced that vehicle ahead, dashed through traffic, slipped past the tail end of signals.

CHAPTER III

A BIT OF DETECTING



SUPER DRIVING on the driver's part was necessary, but we finally cornered the other vehicle in a dead-end street in Hollywood Hills. Both curbs were lined with motor cars. Some of the motors had streamers on

them. It looked like a wedding. But wedding or not, this time there would be no idle parley or needless words. When I got through with the man he wouldn't be in shape to run out again. I didn't have any plans regarding the girl.

Leaping out of my own taxi, I was ready when the cabby ahead opened the customer door to his vehicle. An old lady smelling of lavender got out. "Oh, dear!" she said. "I hope I'm not too late! The music has already started."

That was all I waited to hear. I need not explain that we had been following the wrong vehicle. With no little disgust, I hurried to my taxicab and told the driver to make all haste back to the Equitable Central Building, which he did.

It was too late, of course. I was out six dollars, nothing had been accomplished, and Miss Alice Faire was nowhere in sight. I telephoned the office upstairs. Nobody an-

swered to ask me what I wanted. If there was anybody in Miss Alice's apartment, they didn't answer the telephone either. . . .

Mr. James Madison was in his swivel chair when I arrived at his office the next morning to work on my own case. His eyes turned from the window to me.

"Good morning, Robert. We'll go down and get you registered and get a permit for you to carry a gun. Then you can go over and see your man." He added in an off-hand manner, "His name is J. B. Kruger. The dame's Estelle Richie."

"Wait!" I cried. "I say, old fellow, you are dispensing the information at much too fast a rate for me. Where, James, did you get this information?"

"He didn't say 'elementary' as I supposed he would. What he did say was:

"Very simple. One of your witnesses said that the black car had Monarch Cushion Cords. The downtown distributor let me see his books. They'd put on an average of three sets a day for the last two months. The tires are sold mostly for new car change-overs, or new cars assembly. The Vermont Avenue Branch takes care of the district from Main Street west.

"Cut down still further, I found that thirty-three full sets had been put on Cadillacs. I eliminated such people as the Murphy sisters, Mrs. Wainwright of the West Adams Park district and a few more like that. All of the orders had telephone numbers except one. I thought this one might be interesting. It was. The service man remembered he had delivered a car equipped with new Monarchs to a Mr. J. B. Kruger. But the name given had been Estelle Richie.

"I went upstairs at the address given and got a good look at the man. The gent is the one you want. If you clean up the joint, bring the receptionist home with you. We'll slap the breath out of her and put her in the front window for a doll."

I looked at him with undisguised admiration.

"James," I said, "I beg leave to apologize for my lack of faith in you. If detection is the milieu in which I am fated to work, let us take it on the lam at once."

He stared at me, not knowing of course

that I had started to study for my new position, which was the consorting with, and the apprehending of, criminals.

"Did you say what the address was, James?" I asked.

He grinned at me then. I didn't say. First, let's get down to Central before Captain Browning gets away. One thing to your advantage is that by no stretch of imagination do you look like an operator—" He pulled up. "I mean, if you start right you won't have to unlearn anything. I had a young fellow who



Curtin backed up from her,
and then I hit him—hard!

wanted to work for me, and the first thing he did was nearly scare me to death. He came popping into the office with a disguise that had people following him for blocks. Next, I saw him shadowing a man. He'd pop in and out of doorways, hide behind tele-

phone poles and cars. He had everybody on the street nervous, including the bird he was following."

I laughed contemptuously. I thought it would serve no useful purpose to tell him that, I, too, had planned to wear a beard and other suitable disguises when I went calling on Mr. Kruger.

I WENT through all the rigamarole of getting a private detective's sub-operator's

card. It was tedious, yet interesting in a way. It would give a quasi-legal aspect to what I intended doing now.

"You want me to help with this Kruger deal?" asked Madison.

I objected strenuously. "Let me explain, James. This is something I must do myself. I shall pursue these malefactors with all vigor and shall not rest until I have brought them to task for their criminal trespasses. Never fear, James, I will not fail. These unpleasant people must be taught a lesson—but by *me*. What did you say the address was?"

"The fifth floor of the Equitable Central Building. Latimer Perfume Company."

"What?" I asked weakly. "Shoot me dead, James! Miss Alice Faire is employed at the Equitable Building—on the fifth floor! Did you say the perfumery business?" I added hurriedly: "I've got to telephone."

"Who in the—who is Alice Faire?" he demanded. When I told him, he nodded and said: "Take your time. I'll meet you back at the office."

Miss Alice had a bell-like tone until she recognized my voice on the telephone. Then she cooled considerably. She called me a stand-upper pal, and said she'd come out of the building just in time to see me running down the sidewalk chasing after another girl—or somebody.

"Shoot me dead! You don't understand. Miss Alice, what I wish to ask is of monumental importance. Kindly listen intently. Who, may I ask, is your employer?"

I could hear her stamp her foot. "Robert," she exclaimed, "what in the world has come over you? If I were at liberty to tell you for whom I am working, which I am not, I would have told you before this. You promised not to try to find out the exact office. There are new lines the company wishes to guard, and—"

"Well, is he tall and dark? Is his name Mr. Kruger?"

Her voice smiled back at me, getting its revenge for the two broken appointments.

"You are fifty per cent right, Robert," she said, "and now I have to—"

"Kindly meet me at lunch. Eleven-thirty at Levinson's Cafe. We have several things to discuss." I got all this shouted into the re-

ceiver before she could hang up.

I was still excited about her when I got back to the office. Madison listened carefully when I told him that my good friend, Miss Alice Faire, might be in the same office that harbored this despicable Kruger person. She might even be in danger, I insisted.

"If it's that bad," he said, "we're in for trouble."

I frowned at him. "Let us use the subjunctive mood, James. If this thing be bad, we may be in trouble."

He grinned at me. Then I watched the two Flight cars wend their monotonous bulks across our windows in their catty-cornered way.

Mr. Madison liked to talk. He began now, lecturing me on some of the fine points of detection. *Chela Enfield, Guru Madison.*

"That fake license of Kruger's places him definitely," he told me. "Be careful. In your case, I don't believe a disguise is indicated. Although we'll have to do something about that Jane Austen technique." He looked at me closely, then shook his head. "Mebbe not. Go ahead, act natural. But you'll have to get your blue-eyed babe out of the way. Phone her and make an appointment to meet you at some restaurant for lunch. Then you can call on the Krugers upstairs without interference."

"I got you," I told him, lapsing into his degeneration of speech. "But for Miss Alice, I do not like to pull her leg again. I have failed her on two occasions. This, James, will be the third. And, wait, is she not in danger?"

He shook his head. "No. A girl can be virtuous anywhere if she wants to."

I flushed, then said a little coldly, "I mean physical danger."

AT ELEVEN-THIRTY I reached the Equitable Central Building. Not really "casing the joint," I was keeping an eye out for Miss Alice. I didn't want to run into her. Once upstairs, I would pretend I was calling on another person on that same floor. But I would stop and talk to whoever was in charge of the perfumery counter. That was what I thought.

I waited across the street in a doorway un-

til Miss Alice came hurrying out to meet me at Levinson's Grill where, of course, I would not be. I felt lower than a Thames River diver when I saw her go on her dewy-eyed way. Shoot me dead!

The fast lift in the Equitable Central Building took me to the fifth floor before I was quite ready to be deposited thereupon. Yet I felt safe enough. Listed on the wall directory were three firms:

THE LATIMER PERFUME COMPANY.

WESTERN CHELSEAE MINING COMPANY.

THE LOVE-LI NAN BRASSIERE DISPLAY ROOMS.

As an excuse to be on the fifth floor, I immediately accepted the Chelsoe Mining Company to call on. I was the wrong sex to be visiting the Love-Li Nan Company. I had it all planned. Loitering at the perfumery showroom, I could very soon find out if their business was a "front," as James Madison said it probably would be.

I looked down the corridor. Already a glittering showcase was beckoning to me. Behind the showcase was a table piled high with bottles of various shapes and colors. A closed mahogany door indicated an office behind all this.

There was no receptionist at the desk. This I immediately felt was because she was waiting for me at the Levinson Café. Poor Miss Alice Faire. Was I not a bounder?

A tiny and precise sign on the perfume display case said:

Please ring.

I was on the point of pressing the nacre button when I remembered one of James Madison's admonitions: "Never ring a bell unless you absolutely have to do so." So instead of pressing the button, I gently toppled an advertising pasteboard sign over the nacre to cover it. Then I looked at the sign I had toppled. It showed a young lady in undress stepping through the name "*Danseuse*."

Moving back of the showcases as though being invited, I stopped at the inner door. Voices came from behind it, but they were too indistinct for me to make out what they

said. An idea came to me, the audacity of which scared me a little.

Like the narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's story of the telltale heart, I began turning the door knob. I moved it slowly, so slowly it took me a full minute to get it turned enough to release the catch. Then in a new slowness that was desperate from the first, I began opening the door. A single millimeter, then two, three—if those inside had been watching they still couldn't have seen it move. Poe's minute hand moved faster than that door cracking open. Now I could hear the voices distinctly.

"—just leave that to me, Kruger. Don't forget that I worked for the railroad for twenty years."

A laugh sounded. I had heard that laugh before. It would take me a long time to forget it. A voice said:

"That's right, Curtin. You worked for them until they threw you out."

There was a curse. The next voice was that of a girl, probably Miss Fender-crusher.

"You certainly pulled a boner, Curtin," she said in a low-pitched voice, "putting on those phony license plates before we were ready."

Curtin hit back. "They'd been all right if you knew how to drive."

"Cut it out," snapped Kruger.

After a moment the girl spoke again. "But I do get to go to San Francisco?"

"Now, Estelle! I've got this thing all planned. You're to take care of the office. That's settled. We've got to have somebody here for contacts if anything goes wrong. Curtin and I go to San Francisco, and the other men will join us by ones and twos—you know the rest of the plan."

The voices faded for a moment. Then I heard the railroader laugh and say:

"I'm goin' to like this! Will a certain railroad have a red face." His laugh sounded like a man choking to death. It also sounded as though the conversation, whatever it meant, was about over.

I began the slow closing of the door again, and then the releasing of the knob, which I had been gripping until my knuckles ached. At each moment I fully expected the knob to be turned out of my grasp. It wasn't.

CHAPTER IV

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD



A VOICE behind me made me jump.

"Young man, may I ask—"

I swung around at the "ask." A motherly-type woman was looking at the perfumery. I shook my head quickly, but didn't speak until I had regained the showcase distance from the inner door.

"These are floor samples," I explained. "Nothing is for sale." I nodded toward the door I had just left. "It was stuck." That took care of her.

I walked on down the hall expecting the door I had just quitted to open at any moment. I sighed with relief when I looked back. The woman was moving down the corridor toward the lift. It was then that I decided luck played an important part in detection work.

The information I had just obtained "casing" the place meant that Kruger and Miss Estelle Richie were up to something. What this was, I did not know—yet.

I waited in front of the Chelsoe Mining Company's door until two men and a tall brunette girl came out of the perfume office. I tried to make it appear I was just leaving the mining company. I had to go in or move toward them. I moved toward them.

The three stood talking at the door. I stiffened, recognizing J. B. Kruger and Miss Estelle Richie. The other man was squat, had red hair and a fat, unhealthy-looking face. His small eyes bored at me suspiciously. The others merely looked at me and then away.

I managed with difficulty to keep my hate submerged while I moved past them to the stairs. When out of their sight, I took the steps two at a time all the way to the lobby.

It was a good thing I used the stairs instead of the lift. A vision in yellow-and-blue-and-white-trimmed gray was just coming inside. Its head was high and its blue eyes held straight to the front. Heel taps made a decisive little pounding noise across the tile.

From this and the firm way Miss Alice was protruding from her white sweater, I had every reason to believe she was angry with me. I didn't move until the door of the lift clanged shut and moved out of sight.

Again I was a trapper of men. I was across the street in the thickening noon crowd when Mr. Curtin, the disfranchised railroader, came out of the building and started west toward Main Street. From across the street I started west toward Main Street. There was a little bloodhound in me, I told myself.

My man stopped and looked into a drug store window. Then he went inside. I waited. Trailing a man wasn't so difficult. In Southwick County where I had once played a lead in the Countryside Players, we had put on a Chicago, U.S.A. gangster play. I remembered most of the "lingo." I even remembered some of the lines.

While I waited for my man to reappear, the minutes ran on. Minutes that slowly turned into half an hour. I crossed the street and went boldly into the drugstore, where I put a twenty-five cent piece on the tobacco counter and selected a mild-looking cigar. While lighting the cigar with the booklet of matches furnished, I looked around.

I didn't see Curtin. I bought a package of razor blades at another counter, a reprint book I didn't want at another. I blew smoke along the rows of telephone booths. Mr. Curtin was in none of these departments, nor was he in the store.

I looked at the cigar, suddenly quite sick. I was glad to consign the offending weed to the gutter, where it rightly belonged.

I felt better by the time I'd reached the office. James Madison was just inside the door, his hat in his hand as though he hadn't been there long. He was talking to a woman.

"You don't need a private investigator, lady. Your wandering brother is probably in the city directory, which you can inspect free at any branch of the public library. If he's not in it, go to the secretary of the Elk's Lodge. They'll know of him and help you find him. If you don't find him, come back to me."

I stood there with the fidgets until the good woman, whom I suspected of being a domestic out of a job, took her free advice

from Mr. Madison and left. When the door closed after her, I unburdened by story to him.

HE NODDED frequently over his encrusted glass until I had finished.

"That other man was Red Curtin," he said then. "I ran counter to him back in Forty-five when he tried to steal a carload of grain from the railroad."

Madison pushed the bottle toward me, but I shook my head.

"I lost him," I said. He went into a drug store—"

James Madison smiled. "Yeah, I know. Red Curtin's got a room at the Kane Hotel on Main Street. Registered under the name of Anderson. A smooth bird, Curtin."

I was astounded by my colleague's knowledge and exclaimed over it. But he in turn complimented me on my astuteness in overhearing the talk at the Equitable Building. He said under his breath something about where angels fear to tread.

"Curtin," he explained, "went on through the drug store and out the alley exit. He didn't know he was being followed, was just playing it safe. Sometimes it takes two to shadow a man. This job did. I was in front of the building when you set out after him. I recognized him and then took him all the way."

Madison lighted a cigar, which made me grow pale.

"I've got some more stuff on Kruger," he said. "Been in a couple of investigations, but nothing ever came of them. No record. The dame was picked up once for having too much wearing apparel in her apartment, but nobody could identify the stuff. They're up to something big, and that's no fooling. We may get a case out of this yet—unless you want to make it simple and give the insurance adjuster and the cops their address." His blue eyes twinkled under their heavy brows. He looked more of a rugged individual than ever. "Of course they'll say they never saw you before in their lives, and their car won't have the license number you turned in. If you want to take a chance—"

"Don't make me laugh with my mouth, James," I said coolly. "I can assure you my

answer would be in the absolute negative. If necessary, I shall pursue them to the grave. Their suffering must be commensurate to the act. It is the principle of the thing now. Gun moll or peterman, it makes little difference to me as long as I can put the finger on them. Is this understandable, James?"

"Uh-huh," he said and I thought there was a little surprise in his manner. Perhaps it was his thought that I was unacquainted with the language of the underworld.

"This renegade railroader puts a different light on the situation," he said. "I can understand the perfume angle. A few years back perfumery was the front for getting quotas for grain alcohol. Kruger's probably doing this now, as a sort of side line between bigger things. Robert, this thing is getting bigger every moment. If the boys are planning on committing a crime against the railroad, it'll make a Federal offense of it—which means the stakes are plenty high."

I thought he was right and told him so. Although I don't drink, I suggested that we have a small tonic to our success and to Kruger and Company's downfall. This we continued doing until the receding line of red liquid called a halt to our discussion.

That afternoon James Madison put on a series of lectures on the Art of Detection. Standard form, Number Two to Five. He also did an amazing amount of work for the little physical exertion expended. To help, he rented for a dollar a day a room across from the lobby of the Kane Hotel. One of us was at the window there most of the day. Mr. Madison said that several of the "characters" that went in and out were men with records. What we were waiting for was "Red" Curtin to come out so we could see what he was up to. He stayed in his room all day.

Miss Alice was still angry with me. I tried to see her, but she had her night school classes, and at noon was lunching with what she called friends.

The automobile agency wrote me, sending a bill for the repairs. The news this time was a little better. Did I know that the insurance policy was a fifty-dollar deductible one? All I had to do was bring in the sum of fifty dollars and the coupé would be restored to me. Also, the insurance investigator would like to

have my testimony again, as he had been unable to locate any witnesses of the accident.

Then Red Curtin decided to move. I was sitting in the front window across from the Kane trying to find out the difference in policy between the *Mirror* and the *Daily News* when my man came out of the hotel. A Gladstone bag was in his hand. He walked a half-block—I could see that much from the window—and hailed a taxicab.

THIS was it. I telephoned James Madison from the pay phone and told him what had happened. He had the answer. It seemed that James always had the answer. Red Curtin was on his way to the railroad station. It would be the railroad station, James said, for if he was leaving by bus he wouldn't have had to take a cab. The bus station was nearby. We had one more segment in the puzzle. Only we didn't know what the gang had in mind.

"Better go up and talk to Estelle, if you think she won't recognize you," suggested James. "Kid her along. Tell her confidentially that you're in the alcohol racket and see what you can find out. I think the Government tax on alky is about six dollars, so that might give you an idea. Only this isn't the alky racket, take my word for it. If you're sure Kruger isn't there, ask for him."

"I'm turning the corner, James," I said.

Hanging up, I went downstairs and started for the Equitable Central Building, hoping I wouldn't have to go in under the wistful blue eyes of Miss Alice.

But I played it smart. Standing across the street from the Equitable Building, I waited. I had it all planned. Miss Estelle Richie would be followed until an opportune time afforded itself for conversation. My business with Miss Estelle Richie could as well be done in a pub as up in the office, anyway. If Miss Alice came out first then I'd go upstairs.

Miss Alice came out first. She was as bright and gay and white-sweatered as ever. My knees turned weak. I would have to do something about that sweater.

Feeling like a Northampton polecat, I kept in hiding until she was safely on her way. Then I went up to the fifth floor. I thought I

was too late until I saw the office door ajar. I listened. There were no voices from within. The *Danseuse* was in place on the counter and there was the bell button beside it. This time I pressed the button.

Estelle, the beautiful fender-crusher, came to the door.

"Yes?" she said, with an arching of her eyebrows.

Her lips were sultry and voluptuous. She had a creamy complexion, raven-black hair, and dark lustrous eyes. One more boisterous than I might have called her a lulu. But from where I stood she looked like a lady of quality.

"Anybody around?" I asked, while I studied a bottle of *Floral Fragrance de Mexico*. The bottle had enough dancing señoritas on the label to have started a chorus on North Main Street.

She looked me up and down. Then she smiled a faint, wandering smile.

"I'm here." When that didn't interest me, she added, "Haven't I seen you some place?"

"Not lately. I quit going to taxi dances."

Her creamy complexion flooded with color, then went creamy again. The look she gave me could have been used for ice cubes.

But I was in character. I looked past her. Nobody was in sight.

"All right, toots," I said, "tell him I'm here. Gentleman Sam Kern! To make it short and sweet," I added, "it's the alky deal. I can up the figure—" I let it stop there. That should be enough of a hint.

Her eyes quieted down. "I don't know what you're talking about, but there's nobody here," she said, "and you certainly don't talk like a gentleman—Gentleman Sam Kern or not."

I shrugged. "As you just said, you're here. I don't mind talking to you." I nodded toward the interior. "Milady, do you mind if we repair to your office where we might have a measure of privacy?"

Her bold eyes swept me again, a little startled this time. But she led the way into the office. She stopped suddenly inside.

"Say, weren't you up here yesterday?"

"Certainly," I said. "But I didn't stay. The place was smelled up by virtue of a rather low person being here, talking to the two

of you. . . Pardon me," I went on past her into the office, adding: "I certainly don't wish to censure you on your selection of associates."

I moved a chair for her to sit in, which made her raise her nice brows again. I reminded myself that she was the creature I hated.

Gentleman Sam Kern," she said, turning my sobriquet over.

CHAPTER V

HARD TO HATE



THE lady was studying me now, still half angry. She picked a gold cigarette case off the mahogany desk and lighted a cigarette, her movements graceful as a black panther's. Perhaps as dead-ly.

"Just what *do* you want?" she asked through the smoke she had created.

I tried another tack. "You've made me forget what I came for," I told her gallantly.

She gave a merry peal of laughter, which sounded genuine enough.

"Do you mind getting on the telephone?" I asked her. "I'd like to talk to Kruger. Then I'd like to talk to you about some of the nice watering places you've visited, or about Monte Carlo, where you can win a grand on the turn of a card, and then toss the clocks into the bay."

She got up and walked across the room. This was probably to let me see her shape, which *was* exciting. She was doing a lot of thinking, too. She blew out more smoke and looked at me through it.

"Kruger is out of town," she said softly.

I got up and took my hat off. "When he gets back tell him to call me at the—" I pulled up. "No, give me one of the cards here. I'll telephone in a few days. And I want you to know I didn't mean that crack about you working in a taxi dancehall. That was stupid."

"Are you really stupid?"

"If you want me to be."

She laughed, pushing her lower lip out at me. This was to show me she was not displeased with my sentiments.

"I'll go downstairs with you," she said.

I helped her on with the jacket she brought from a closet. I opened the door for her.

"We might have a drink together," she suggested.

"Why not?"

We went down the lift and into the Savoy Grill and Barroom. She told me her name was Estelle Richie and I told her I was happy to make her acquaintance.

I called the bartender and she ordered a Daiquiri. She looked at me. "I can drink anything," I said. "Two."

When I lighted her cigarette she pushed closer to me. She held my hand that held the match.

"What do you want to see Kruger about?" she asked.

When I refused to talk business, she smiled around the red-leathered barroom. This gave me the chance to study her. She was as hard as they come and yet she was feminine. Well-modeled features, lips that showed appreciation for anything nice said about her, yet which could turn into a hard, straight line, too.

I knew better than to ask her to accept me at face value and to give me the information I needed. I was thinking about how to manage it when she smiled at me and showed me the way.

"Could you excuse me for a moment?" she asked.

I got up and stood while she moved gracefully back to the Ladies Lounge.

Hardly had the lounge door closed behind Miss Estelle Richie than I had found a telephone at the end of the bar. I was soon talking to James Madison. I explained what I wanted, gave him the address of the pub and hung up immediately. I was back in my seat watching the drinks grow cold when my fair companion returned. I reminded myself again I'd have to keep hating her.

She smiled and sat down. It was a nice pub. Not overly crowded and our booth was obscured from the bar. A glass door separated the lounge part from the dining room, where a hostess was watching for customers.

For all her sophistication, Miss Estelle gave me her enraptured attention when I told her about Paris and about the Riviera. I didn't have to pretend, for I had been to both places. Her eyes were glowing like a school-girl's. I was just carrying on until James arrived.

We were on our second drink and she had moved closer to me in the booth when I saw James out of the side of my eye. She noted my look of repugnance.

"What's the matter?"

"I get sick at my stomach when I see a dick," I told her.

SHE TENSED, watching Madison closely as he came past us and gave us the once-over. He went all the way back and disappeared inside the men's room. I sneered after him. She helped me with the sneering.

"I'm clean," I told her. "The cops have nothing on me. Only this bird is probably a private eye, which is worse."

"Don't worry about him," she said quickly. Her hand was on my arm. "We don't want any trouble at all, not now."

I smiled at her and looked very hard indeed. "I don't like cops. They cost me a hundred grand once!"

When Madison came back toward us, I stepped out in front of him.

"Looking for somebody?" I said truculently.

James pulled up. He was surprised enough to make it look good. He looked at me and then at the girl seated in the booth.

"Sorry," he said.

"Cop or shamus?" I asked.

He gave an imitation of a smile. "I'm a bricklayer."

I flipped his coat open. A gun was in a shoulder holster.

"Yeah!" I sneered. "What do you do, lay the bricks or shoot them?" I sneered again. I was getting rather good at it. "I don't know whether you came in here to give me a gander or not, but I got *your* number. Peddle your papers some place else before I take that rod away from you and shove it down your throat. Beat it!"

To my relief, James nodded meekly and went on his way. He didn't even stop at the

bar, where obviously he had been headed. The important thing was the respect that came in Miss Estelle's eyes. She was much impressed. "Darling," she said, "you can get tough, can't you? I'd a figured him out for anything but a—cop." She'd added a very unladylike word to the "cop."

I looked into my glass. The liquid, whatever its component parts might be, seemed a little more aggressive than James Madison's life-blood of California. I would have to keep my eye on that drink. I would have to keep my eye on Miss Fender-crusher, too. I felt a little light and airy, but everything was under control.

I leaned closer to her. "I hate to leave such charming company, but I'll have to. I'll be away from you for a few days. That is—" I hesitated and looked at her.

Her smile raised its eyebrows. I poured on the gentleman routine again.

"Miss Estelle, I'm traveling north tonight—alone. At the risk of a reprimand, I'd like to ask, would you care to go with me? I've reservations at the St. Francis, and—"

She forgot the reprimand and asked in a quick whisper:

"What's doing in Frisco?"

I shrugged. "I won't know till I get there. But I'll be cut in. After the job's done, we could go places and do things in a big way."

Her eyes were suspicious again. "But you must know *something*."

I laughed at her scoffingly. "You probably know all about it. It's out of my line, but I can use a few extra bills. Lack of money, I find, engenders a certain contempt for the higher arts. This I wish to correct, even if it's necessary to associate with torpedos and pettermen, mugs chiseling in, hoods with their belts sagging with iron. You know, big-time stuff."

She knew what I meant. She knew what I meant about taking her up north, too. "Go easy, old boy," I told myself and sipped cautiously at my drink.

"The big deal?" she breathed.

I looked around, then nodded. "I'm cutting myself in. That's really why I wanted to see Kruger. Can you get in touch with him for me?" I smiled at her.

"Not now, I can't." She bit her nice vo-

luptuous lip.

"We don't have to go into San Francisco," I said. "Oakland, across the bay, would be safer—for you and me."

"I wish I knew just what to do—whether I could trust you," she said softly. "Can I trust you?"

I didn't help her any. "You can't trust anybody in this racket."

But my hand had found hers. This was a mistake. Her fingers tightened against mine and I felt myself blushing like a schoolboy. So far it was a bluff as far as I was concerned. If she said she'd go with me, I would be in a mess.

"I don't know," she said slowly. Miss Estelle was thinking again, turning the thing over in her mind, trying to find out what would be of the most benefit to her.

"Where—can I get in touch with you in the morning?" she said at last. "There's another angle, and I think you're tough enough to pull it."

"You mean, the old doublecross?"

Her face flushed a little. I fed her a little more.

"You mean, because Kruger's running around after that other dame?"

It was a shot in the dark, one that seldom fails with a jealous woman. Her eyes lighted with fire.

"Do you know—everything?"

I grinned at her. "Sure." I wanted to hear some more about the doublecross.

But she was still what James called "cagey." She was willing to listen, but she wasn't willing to put out too much information. Still, she had been impressed by the Madison interlude.

"All right, all right," I said soothingly, "we'll skip it. I was supposed to see Kruger yesterday here. He doesn't know me, but I was supposed to help. If you don't want to go north with me—" I accented the "me" and let it play.

Her warmth was back again. Her fingers had found my hand again.

"We don't have to go to San Francisco to be together. I like you. I like you a lot."

Her body pushed against me. Her lips were hot against mine. The booth suddenly had more privacy than I needed. Shoot me dead!

"Stay here in L.A." she said, after a while, "and I'll guarantee your cut. There's no reason you can't share when the stuff is divided between us."

"Among, my dear. 'Among' implies more than two."

She stared at me, but her eyes suddenly glowed. "That's what I mean, darling. *Between* us!"

I caught it. She was suddenly having ideas. Her body and mine were in close proximity and her hand squeezed my hand. She had that look that said, "Do you mind if I put on something more comfortable?"

My weakening judgment told me this was as far as I should go with Miss Estelle. That she wanted to see me again was important.

"I'll see you tomorrow afternoon at four," I told her.

She looked piqued. There was one more question I wanted to ask her. In another moment I would have forgotten it.

"Any other girls like you work in the perfumery biz upstairs?"

She lowered her silky lashes and shook her head.

"What's the matter with me?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said a little uneasily.

But I had my answer. If she was telling the truth, Miss Alice didn't work there. In the interest of my detective work, I took Miss Estelle into my arms and kissed her with all the fervor I could summon. . . .

When I got into a cab, I was still dizzy, and it wasn't entirely from the alcohol I had consumed.

Cagily, I made my way back to the office. Somebody might be following me. A cab took me to the top of Bunker Hill. I looked at some magazines at the Angels Flight Pharmacy. I went on to Olive Street where a tiny orange-and-black building housed the machinery, cables and the operator of the Flight.

I stood around on the platform waiting for the up car to unload. A man had taken a *Christian Science Monitor* from the free distribution box and was reading it. I had little to fear from him. Yet I waited until the warning horn sounded before giving my nickel to the combination operator and ticket seller. Theoretically I received two tickets, one of which the operator dropped into the

slot. I stepped aboard the car.

The car started down, dragging its safety cable after it. Another car started up from Hill Street. I looked down. An alley crossed under the trestle of track. A sign said the alley was a street. Clay Street. Counterbalanced on the same cable, the upward-bound car swerved aside politely on a permanent switch and we passed. Then the car in which I was riding began dropping past more hotel and office windows.

One of the windows said:

WIDE-AWAKE DETECTIVE AGENCY

Through the window I could see a rugged individual asleep at the desk, his feet on it.

CHAPTER VI

A FLAIR FOR THE BUSINESS



JAMES was wide-awake, though when I went into the office.

When I got through telling him the amazing story of Miss Estelle Richie, he said:

"Robert, you've got the feel of this business. I like the way you handled that deal in the Savoy Bar. What's more important, the dame went for it all." He grinned at me. "I don't like to mention this, but your lipstick's on crooked."

I hurriedly wiped my mouth with my white handkerchief. The red that came off certainly wasn't wine. It was undeniably lipstick—Miss Estelle's lipstick.

"James," I protested, "this is not what you think. In pursuance of the work to be done it seemed a strategic gesture to come as close as possible to the enemy. What seems a bit of digression on my part was, I assure you, in a most serious vein. Without this seeming inattention to business I would not now be in the high regard in which Miss Estelle Richie holds me. In fact, as I related to you, I have a tentative appointment with the young lady tomorrow afternoon at four."

James Madison's face lightened and darkened and lightened again as the Flight cars rose and descended past the window. I

couldn't tell whether he was grinning in the darkened intervals or not; it seemed he was. But he was serious when the room had regained its former light, so I did not take him to task.

"I went to the railroad station and saw Curtin off," he said. "A couple of guys who met him at the hotel got on the same train. Separate cars. San Francisco-bound."

He began walking back and forth across the floor.

"Using the Socratic law we can ask and answer the following questions." He tapped an index finger against the palm of his other hand. "Number One, Kruger is planning on committing a crime; Number Two, because of Red Curtin's cooperation, the crime is probably against the railroad; Number Three, it is to be committed in or near San Francisco; Number Four, time of the crime is probably the day before the Santa Anita racetrack opens down here, which is something to consider; Number Five, crime is of some magnitude, for a number of mobsters have been assembled for it."

He stopped and looked at me.

"My guess is this," he went on. "A large sum of money in San Francisco has been earmarked for Santa Anita interests. Likely in the express office waiting shipment. The blow-up and robbery comes off and the mob scatters all over California, to meet some place later for the payoff."

"How about the express train, James? Could they not be planning on robbing it?"

He laughed with undue heartiness. "The days of Jesse Jimmie are over, Robert." Then he turned sober. "You think I'd better go up to San Francisco with you?"

"No," I said firmly. "It is a matter of principle, James. I want to be the exact means of Mr. Kruger's downfall. I want to laugh as he laughed. I want to tell him that because of the indignity—"

"Yeah, yeah," said James hastily. "You'll likely need some help up there. See the Turk Street Detective Agency. I've done a lot of work for them down here. I'll wire them to put a man on Curtin when he gets off the train. At least, you'll know what hotel your man is in."

"That will be splendid, James."

James Madison said he would telephone Miss Estelle at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon, simulate my voice and change the appointment for the next afternoon. That would give me another day to work. I might need that day.

I left on the bus that night for San Fran-

ple going places with a purpose. No indolent lying about in parks, no standing idly on street corners. Everything was in motion. Market Street only had changed—to the indignation of the old-timers. Two of the four tram tracks had been abandoned and now buses were invading the world-famous street

FORBIDDEN!

DID YOU KNOW that it's definitely against the law—

... to ride on a street car within four hours after eating garlic in GARY, INDIANA?

... for young ladies to accost and kiss strange men in public in DECATUR, ILLINOIS?

... for a man to stare "too long and too often" at a female in LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA?

... to stand at a jail window and make fun of the prisoners in LENISON, IOWA?

... to open an umbrella near a horse in NEW YORK CITY?

... to croon out-of-tune in the State of NORTH CAROLINA?

... to refuse to leave a burning building in MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA?

... for young ladies to wear "nothing" under their form-fitting dresses during the summer months in ROME, ITALY?

... to fall asleep inside a refrigerator in PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA?

... to have a dead man arrested for a debt in NEW YORK CITY?

... to lead a cow (without first attaching a red tail-light to it) through the streets of HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA, at night?

... to hug or kiss a public statue in DUBLIN, IRELAND?

—Joseph C. Stacey



cisco. It was cheaper on the bus. As the overcrowded vehicle rolled through the night, I found myself wondering how it would feel really to chew on that sultry, voluptuous lip I had sampled. I swore lightly at myself and turned my thoughts to a purer vein—to Miss Alice Faire. . . .

SAN FRANCISCO. Its glamorous, immutable hills . . . its cable cars . . . its peo-

ple making impolite Bronx noises at the loyal San Franciscans.

I telephoned the Turk Street Agency from the bus depot. They told me I would find Red Curtin registered at the Clarabelle Hotel just off Market.

I walked over a few blocks and into the lobby. Curtin didn't see me, but I saw him. He was talking to two of the men he'd met at the Hotel Kane in Los Angeles. They

were well-dressed, but stiff in the clothes they were wearing. They looked like workers who had taken a day off to appear before a magistrate on a traffic charge.

Some unlawful business was in the making. I was sure of that by now. I still couldn't guess what it was.

The Turk Street Agency might be able to help me. It was nine-thirty in the morning when I stopped in. I was as cagey as one of the gang I was watching. I told the manager, who said his name was Adams, that we were doing some work for a client who wanted to find out what this man Red Curtin was up to. The manager, who was a bald little man with shoe-button eyes, flipped through a book and told me that James Madison of Los Angeles owed them a hundred and ten dollars in time over and above what Madison had done for them.

"Shoot me dead!" I exclaimed. "That is preposterous! Sir, permit me to correct you. Either your mathematics or your business acumen is at fault. Withhold your harsh words until I acquaint you with the facts. Then we shall discuss a matter that concerns two villainous characters whose downfall we seek."

"Wha—what!" Mr. Adams stared at me, then at two of his hirelings who sat about trying to pick a horse for the Santa Anita opening.

"No principle has been violated," I assured him. "Yours is quite a simple mistake. Instead of James Madison owing you, the figures would certainly show you owing him. You err in that you have matched your time here equally against his in Los Angeles. Even a schoolboy, were he in attendance with the true facts, could tell you that one hour of Mr. Madison's is equal to three hours of an ordinary operative's, and this, sir, with all due respect to your men present. Thus if there is any monies to be exchanged I am quite certain that I am officially qualified to accept same in Mr. Madison's name—"

"Wait!" The pudgy one waved his hand. "Forget it! I'm sorry I even spoke. What else do you want to know about Curtin?"

"Not about Curtin now." I smiled. "J. B. Kruger. I wish to know what you have about him."

The men looked at each other. Then the short, fat manager said:

"We know this Kruger. Two months ago we did some work for him. He gave a retainer and then—poof! No Kruger. Owes us for a week and expenses. Know where he is?"

"Certainly. You are most certainly entitled to his address the minute we are through with him. What type of work did he employ you to do?"

The manager sighed and waved his boys toward the door.

"Better get going, men. This is going to take some time."

The operators eyed me, I thought, somewhat coldly and went out the door. When they had gone, Adams said:

"Salvage. Kruger wanted a line on a certain ship that was coming to the United States from China bringing private papers and equipment belonging to a racing syndicate. The ship got away just ahead of the Japs—that was in the early days of the war—but it never arrived here. All hands were supposed to have gone down. But two of the syndicate showed up in San Francisco. Kruger had us locate them for him. We did, and that was all." He folded his hands across his arms and watched me with beady eyes.

"Where are those syndicate men now?"

"They were at the Drake. You interested?"

"Very much."

HE CROOKED a telephone instrument to him as I had seen James Madison do. I've seen newspaper reporters handle an instrument with the same careless contempt. He asked for Tim and got Tim. Tim might have been a bellboy or he might have been the house detective; anyway Adams put his question. He kept nodding into the mouthpiece, then waited.

He looked at me as though I should hand him a fifty-cent cigar. When I didn't, he pulled a lesser-priced one out of the desk. Cigar lighted, he fumigated the instrument. Then he was nodding again, and while still nodding, grunted and hung up.

He smiled at me. "You must live right." When I had no answer to that, he added,

"The men are keeping their room at the hotel, but they're leaving on the eleven-thirty this morning for Los Angeles. Does that mean anything?"

"It is significant," I told him. "The Santa Anita racetrack opens down south tomorrow."

He smiled through his cigar smoke. "The hotel got reservations for them on the California Flyer," he said. "Leaves at eleven-thirty and gets into L. A. about nine o'clock tonight."

"Thanks," I said. "Now I must leave. I will convey your good wishes to James. I will also suggest to him that your assistance has been exceedingly helpful and that should a remuneration be indicated it be paid at once. Good day, sir."

One of the men came inside before I could reach the door.

He restrained me with his hand and spoke to the man at the desk.

"Boss," he said, "maybe this man can help us out on that Ethel Stiff affair. She knows all of us by sight. I've just got her telephone number."

He went past me and put a piece of paper on the desk.

Adams smiled happily. "Yes. How about it, Enfield?"

"Time presses," I told them. "However, the spirit of cooperation is strong within me. It is the bond through which the forces of right remain victorious. Yes, if I have the time I will be only too happy to oblige."

"All you have to do is call the dame and find out what she's doing tonight. Use an outside phone and call us back."

I looked at the paper.

Ethel Stiff, Douglas 20461

"If she won't talk, leave a message for her to meet a tall man in front of the St. Francis wearing a white carnation.

I took the message, repeated my farewells and hurried to the railway ticket office. I had to have a ticket on that train.

But the California Flyer was sold out. Four cars had been added to the train, but there was no second section.

Would I care to go out tonight? A train was leaving at 8:15.

I was already walking away from the window. Shoot me dead! I had to be on that train. Something was going to happen on it. What it was I didn't know. I'd have to think of something fast. I didn't have much time, either.

I counted my money. With the twenty-five dollars James Madison had borrowed to advance me I had a total of forty dollars. My eyes turned sideward to the ticket window again. I saw a possible way out. The "way" was a tout-looking character in a checkered racetrack suit. A couple of newspapers were under his arm, a daily *Racing Form* among them.

He had just picked up his reservation. He had a smug expression on his face as though he'd already picked a winner.

I WAS ready for him. We started toward the door at the same time.

"Well, I've got *one* winner tomorrow," I said pleasantly.

If he had been a regular horse player he probably would have said he did, too, and let it go at that. But he belonged to that beloved breed that makes horse racing possible. He was my man.

"Tin-Can Alley?" he asked in a whisper.

I shrugged. "A good horse, but no price." I didn't know Tin-Can Alley from the starter's daughter. "What I mean is something super. In the fifth. I'm going a thousand on the nose if I can get on board the Flyer. There's a man meeting me on the train. He's advancing me another thousand if I cut him in. This is one of those sure things you hear about and never get."

"You got no ticket?"

"I was too late. I guessed wrong. It's the airline for me, I guess."

"That's the way to travel . . . what's the horse?"

"You like to ride planes?" I asked.

When he nodded I knew I had him going. Yet I took time to put on an act. I rubbed my chin, then shrugged.

"I'd rather take the plane myself—you meet big money and hear things traveling—but I've got to meet this man on the train."

I started off.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

CHAPTER VII

A LITTLE BLUE BUTTON



WE WERE outside on the sidewalk now. I turned back.

"Excuse me," I said, "let's see the card. Who's running against him?"

I looked at his chart. The fifth race had an array of fine horses, none of

which I knew. I read them off, leaving out Cylinder II. A twenty-to-one shot. Reeve Stable was listed as the owner, no boy as the jockey.

He had followed me closely, his little eyes burning with excitement. By the process of elimination he had the horse.

"Cylinder the Second!" he whispered.

I smiled. "He's been held up six months for this killing. The tip-off is the jockey who's riding him. If the wrong one is up—"

I let it hang in thin air. But it was all over.

"Who's riding him?"

"I've got to be on the train." I looked at him as though only now seeing him. "Say! It's simple. You fly down and I'll take the train. Here's thirty for an airline ticket."

I had the money in his hand before he could answer. He gave me his ticket and I told him to bet if anybody except C. Carus, jockey, was up.

We were both happy when we parted, he running for the airline office and I to the closest Western Union to wire James Madison I was coming south on the California Flyer.

I took a taxicab and raced to the railroad station. The tip I gave the cab driver was on a horse race—Cylinder II in the fifth. Then I was inside the station watching for Curtin or Kruger. If either boarded the train, so would I. I still had a little time. I would have time to do the errand for Mr. Adams of the Turk Street Agency.

Dodging into a telephone booth where I could watch the waiting room, I spent a nickel on the number given me. When Douglas 20461 answered, I said:

"I'd like to speak to Miss Ethel Stiff . . .

Yes, sir . . . She's lying down? . . . Well, I'd like to leave a message . . . What?"

Then a weary voice explained the facts of life to me. My leg had been pulled. I'd been trying to talk to a corpse.

"Yes, I am a little new at the business," I admitted.

I started to say that Mr. Adams of the Turk Street Agency would like to hear from Miss Stiff, then I pulled up. That wouldn't be cricket. I hung up and started to leave the booth, when I suddenly felt a little clammy, like the morgue I had just called.

It was a good thing I looked through the window before leaving. I saw a familiar figure—Kruger's. He was putting pennies in a machine for salted peanuts he probably didn't want. A man clad in the striped overalls that expressmen usually wear was waiting his turn. By watching closely, I saw that Kruger's lips were moving, passing some comment or other to the man back of him. The "expressman" turned. It was Red Curtin!

Then Kruger was coming toward the telephone booths. I ducked my head while he entered a booth two doors away. As soon as his door shut, I opened mine and looked pained, as though the connection had been no good. I crept in next door to Kruger. He was just saying:

"This is T. E. Anderson. I'd like to check on my plane reservation." That was all from his end except a "Thanks."

I was, to all appearances, hard at work on my own telephone conversation when Kruger's door opened. He looked confident when he moved past. Even the cigar smoke that trailed him across the floor seemed placid and serene.

Another segment in the crime picture puzzle. Kruger was also leaving, but by plane. Where did the two remaining members of the syndicate fit in? What was Red Curtin doing in express garb? I was beginning to realize that being a private operator was not an easy occupation, that it was a bit more than matching wits with mugs, hoods, confidence men and torpedos. I wished James Madison was here to tell me whether to stick to the train or follow Kruger.

Fifteen minutes to train time and a new

crowd now. Arriving in taxicabs, most of the men went directly to the train gate marked:

The California Flyer, 11:30 A. M.

Some carried suitcases, briefcases and bags; some, nothing at all. Form charts everywhere, touts giving last-minute advice to whoever would listen. Selections, money, passed hands at the gate.

I SPENT another nickel calling Mr. Adams. What news Adams had for me did little to solve my puzzle. A man had been on Red Curtin. An hour ago he had seen him check out of his hotel. Curtin had left by himself, carrying a black bag, walked a block to a paint store, made a purchase, and then got into a cab and crossed Market going east toward the railroad station. The added work Adams had decided to do ended here.

I had to smile. Through the glass door of the telephone booth I saw Curtin now. He must be a quick-change artist. He was wearing a blue serge suit now. A black bag was in one hand, a couple of newspapers under his arm. A small, light-blue button was in the lapel of his coat. I caught all that as he went straight to the train gate.

"What did Curtin buy in the paint store?" I asked hurriedly. I heard Adams ask someone else the same question and then: "Large can of putty. And, look, Enfield, we'll expect a check from your office on this."

"Sure, sure," I told him expansively in the manner of Madison. "By the way, that Miss Ethel Stiff was busy. She couldn't come to the telephone. The man who answered the telephone said she was in a trance, picking out a horse for Santa Anita tomorrow. He said she never missed. I finally got the name of the horse. Cylinder the Second in the fifth. Don't pass this one up."

Hanging up, I hurried to the train gate. In a chair car, I parked my hat in my seat and went on back to the tavern car, which was already full.

The tavern car had the look and feel of opulence. Bits of crystallized carbon flashed here and there. The best of Scotch and imported ryes were being ordered. Those who carried small bags or briefcases kept them close at hand. I looked around curiously, al-

most expecting to see Miss Estelle Richie there, her nice legs curled around one of the chrome chairs. She wasn't.

I toyed with a glass of beer I didn't want and kept my eyes open. After a while a tall, pimply-faced individual wedged himself into a chair and ordered a beer. His very unawareness of those about him made me notice him. I was looking for anything a little off-center. This man was off-center. He wore a small light-blue lapel button. Curtin had been wearing a similar one.

I found another blue-button when I went back to my own car. This man was apparently asleep, a *Chronicle* over his face. His hands were delicate, his fingers long. They looked like they could outguess a safe.

My own idea came back to me, the one James Madison had laughingly eliminated. A train robbery. Shoot me dead!

James Madison knew far more about crime than I. Yet to be safe I took my identification papers out of my wallet and put them in my hip pocket. Also the itemized bill the motor car agency had sent me for repairs. I drew a line through my name and wrote in the name of J. B. Kruger. Foremost in my mind was having this invoice handy to present to Kruger at the right time.

The train we were on was not dissimilar to the one plying between London and Epsom Downs. All you could hear was horses, past performances, long shots, logical favorites. It made me think of the last Epsom Derby. Then I'd had ten pounds on Mahmoud, the winner. Now I didn't have a quid on anything, not even on Cylinder II, the phony.

I saw nothing of Red Curtin. I didn't hunt for him. It was enough to know that he was on the train. To pass the time I sat down with the passenger agent while we sped south through green fields and prune orchards.

He gave me some facts about the train. The helper conductors, he said, had finished taking the tickets and had got off. The train now was in the hands of a single conductor, who had three brakemen and nine porters to help him. There were also an engineer, a fireman, expressmen and baggage men.

I was willing to give up the idea of train robbery. Yet Curtin in a railway expressman's suit back in San Francisco worried

me. What had he seen put aboard?

The day wore on. We slipped along the Pacific Ocean hurrying south along the coastline. A news butcher came through the train selling souvenir folders which nobody wanted. I felt like suggesting programs as something he would be able to sell; something like this for him to shout out:

"Shades of Jesse James! Read all about the coming train robbery. You can't tell the robbers without a program!"

This idea seemed funny at the time and it served to pass the interim. The sun was at our backs now and the ocean was deep blue. Lazy gulls floated on the breeze and there were brown streaks in the water that somebody said was kelp.

It was one of those hot days you sometimes find late in the year in California. Most of the men had their coats off, including myself. This gave me an idea for "borrowing" one of the buttons. Maybe I could use it later. I was still skating on ice that was very, very thin. I knew that something was going to happen; I didn't know when or where or what.

With a wary eye out for Curtin, I made my way through several cars until I spotted a blue-button in shirt sleeves. His coat was lying at his side. He was about my size, but he had hard, cold eyes, which I do not have. Sitting alone, he was busily studying a form chart.

I stopped my lurching walk.

"Sorry," I said when he looked up. "I thought you were somebody else. I had a horse—"

The horse idea immediately gave us a common ground. He picked up his coat and moved over.

"That's all right. Sit down, bud."

But this wouldn't do at all.

"Just on my way to the tavern car," I said quickly. "You have a drink?"

"Why not?" He got up, started to put on his coat, decided against it and put it down on the seat again. I followed him on into the tavern car. We ordered Bourbon and I started diving my hands into my pockets. He looked at me as though I were stalling on the bill.

Quickly I tossed two dollar bills on the table for the drinks.

"It's a slip of paper with my horses on it," I told him. "I must have left it back in my seat. I'll be right back." I got up and hurried from the car.

The car porter wasn't in sight when I went past the seat of my new-found friend. Everybody else seemed to be asleep. I picked up his coat and moved on to the end of the car. Nobody was watching me. The men's room was unoccupied and I went in. Unfastening the tiny blue pin from the coat lapel, I hurriedly pinned it to the inside of my pants leg cuff. Then I got the window up and dropped the blue serge coat through it.

I scribbled a list of ponies on a card and hurried back to the tavern car. The man was still reading what the "experts" were saying. The drinks were ready and my two dollars gone.

"Here's a go," I said and lifted mine. Then I scanned the sheet I had. "Cylinder the Second," I told him. "If he's ready to go, it's in the bag."

"How'll you know if he's ready to go?"

I stared at the man's shirt. "Matter of jockeys. If anybody except C. Carus is up, mortgage your farm."

The man looked at his sheet. "It says no boy."

I nodded. "That's why it's a twenty-to-one. That's the only thing you have to watch. If Carus isn't up, plunge."

I stared at his shirt again, pointedly this time. He looked askance at me.

"Hey," I said, "didn't you have your coat on?"

"No, I left it back there." He waved toward the rear of the train.

I hesitated. "I thought you did, too. But your coat wasn't there when I passed your seat. I looked down, thought I might have dropped this paper of mine. Maybe I got the wrong car."

HE DOWNED his drink fast. "I'll go see. I got some letters I wouldn't want to lose. Hey, order me another drink, will you?" He lurched away.

The waiter came with my change. I let him keep a quarter. I handed him my ice-

cubed drink.

"A fresh one for me and another for the gentleman."

He stared at me but took the drink away.

My friend surged back inside as the waiter arrived with the drinks. The man's face was stormy.

"It's gone!" he yelled. "Somebody grabbed it." His anathemas were so intense and vicious they made me pale.

Downing the drink he grabbed from the waiter's tray, he glared at me. I paid for the drinks. If any other type of expense came up I would have to start touting my phony race selections.

But I put on rather a good act, I thought. His coat was beyond redemption. I felt sorry about that. Yet there had been no other way out. Had I merely taken the button and left the coat, suspicions would have been planted. Now the emphasis was on the coat. You would have thought I was the one who had lost a coat by the way I began running around trying to find it and getting porters to check each seat in the adjoining cars.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE STYLE OF JESSE JIMMY



FINALLY I went back to my own car. I saw no more of Coatless, but the Blue-button I'd spotted earlier in the day hadn't moved. The newspaper was still over his face. I felt that as long as he was quiet I could relax. I relaxed.

Darkness came and we left the ocean to its lonely vigil. Inland, small towns blinked at us, but we stopped at none of them. We would stop only once now before we reached Glendale. The stop would be at an unimportant siding named El Toreador, this side of a long tunnel that led down into the San Fernando Valley.

The passenger agent with whom I talked had told me all this. Every night at 8:15 the Flyer met Number 103 at El Toreador. The Flyer was supposed to go into the hole, which

I assumed was the siding. Here was what was called a "rubber" switch at the upper end, so we wouldn't have to stop at the upper end to close it.

Now this information was beginning to mean more to me each minute. Blue-button began sitting up. He wasn't asleep now; he was wide awake and alert.

The news butcher came through the car with the Los Angeles papers. He sold them as fast as he could make change. Here was a new set of horse selectors, a new consensus of opinion. Trainmen came and went through the car. The tempo was picking up.

I looked at my wrist-watch. Eight o'clock.

Blue-button didn't look at me. He didn't look at anybody. Perhaps I had better move up closer to Red Curtin, if I could find him. Maybe I could get close enough to hear him give orders. If something was going to be stolen on board the car it would likely be delivered to Kruger at Glendale Station or Los Angeles. I was trying to think the thing out, but there were too many angles to consider.

I moved into the car ahead. Another man with a lapel button sat in an end seat. I found a chair-car seat vacated by a tavern car customer and sat down. I tried to look like a college student on my way to the races.

Eight-ten. The train began slowing. Was this it? I put my wrist-watch in my hip pocket. Was the train ahead of time? Or was it slowing to pick up a message from the second-trick operator at some small railroad station? But the train began to pick up speed again and my conjectures were left behind.

I moved up to the car ahead. If anything happened I could get up front. Didn't I have a membership button in the Federated Something or Other?

At 8:15 the train came to a stop, jerked and stopped again. It remained motionless. Nobody came in or out the doors. Another slight-jerk and we moved again in a side-warping manner as the train went into a siding. A flash of light showed me a vertical railroad sign:

EL TOREADOR

As yet nothing was wrong, nothing suspicious in this railroading gesture. There was something to see through our windows now

—other lighted windows. Number 103 had arrived from Los Angeles. We shuddered to a stop again, and then Number 103's car lights were moving past, looking like out-of-focus lights on a run-away motion picture machine. Then the lights were gone and we were alone on the lonely railroad crossing.

A man in the back of the car raised up. His hawklike eyes took in the entire car. In that instant I knew that this was it.

If it was a train robbery I could stop it. I'd go forward, find a conductor or another trainman and put them on guard. As though conjured by my thoughts, a lanky man with a blue suit and conductor's cap came through the end door. "Slight delay, folks!" he called out. "A hot box. Please keep your seats."

I stopped myself from grabbing his arm, just in time. The conductor was wearing a blue button!

"Is there a law officer in the car?" he called.

When he received no response, he went on through the car. He didn't glance at the hawk-eyed man, who likely was there to take care of any lawmen who might be in the car.

Before I could move, four men came through the door, working from the front. Each had a mask over his face, a naked pistol in his hand. The men surged into the aisle until they were evenly spaced. I turned a swift glance to Blue-button. He had pulled a mask over his face, too. The robbery was on!

IT DIDN'T seem possible. A modern train was being held up and robbed less than ten miles from the city limits of Los Angeles! Shoot me dead!

Any doubt in the minds of the passengers was dispelled now. The element of surprise was making it easy for the train robbers.

"All right, men!" one of them rasped. "This is a stick-up! Dish it out and nobody'll get hurt!"

He accented his words with a vicious slash with his gun-barrel at the first "customer" who was staring at him, open mouthed. The man went down.

One of the quartette grabbed the passenger by the collar and dragged him back on the seat. He ripped off the man's wrist-watch,

then a diamond ring. He jerked a wallet from the fellow's pocket and dumped the articles in a striped mail-sack he was dragging.

The other passengers got the idea, fast. Wallets and watches and small bags were handed across with alacrity. The robbers with the sack moved relentlessly down the aisle.

The fifth man had his own job.

"Keep your seats, folks!" he snapped. "We got a man at each end of the car."

"You can't do that to me," a passenger mumbled, "I'm a citizen—"

A blackjack hissed through the air and the man stopped being a citizen. Wallets and jewelry became a steady stream into the sack. When the train robbers got to me I had my wallet ready, my pockets turned inside out. This wasn't the time for me to reveal my blue button. If I wasn't scared, my trembling hands were. One of the masked men cursed me for not having more loot.

I was staring spellbound. It was fantastic. This was something that didn't exist. I'd read about bad men, but this had none of the courtly Claude Duval about it. Such a thing wasn't possible. Train robbery had gone out with surreys and two-horse carriages — and this was the day of the modern Diesel streamliner.

The four were now through with the car. They moved on into the next, leaving Blue-button on guard. I got my hands to stop shaking. By stooping over I'd had time to remove the blue button from my cuff and fasten it to the lapel of my coat. Now I hoped I'd be identified as one of them, by them.

There was a horrified silence in the car. Somebody was kneeling over the man who had made a break for safety. I didn't wait to hear what he said. I was moving toward the end of the car, thumbing my button at the robber who was left on guard. He stifened behind his mask. This wasn't in his script. He didn't know what to do.

"It's all right, bud," I whispered. "Had to stay back here. Red don't trust nobody."

He nodded stiffly and watched me move past him. I might have hit him and knocked him unconscious, but that was too big a

chance to take. His look, what I could see of it, didn't reassure me. It was plain that the keynote of this convention was not one of confidence. No one trusted anyone here. They wouldn't have trusted their own mothers.

Luckily this end of the car was open. Somebody had pulled part of the platform up. There were steps. I leaned down the steps and listened. The ground was mottled with train lights and shadows. Few sounds from the night, only the soft hissing of compressed air.

But the lights from the train windows showed me a road some fifty yards away, lined with motor cars, silent and motionless in the gloom. Two men were carrying a heavy sack across the intervening space and cursing the bag for being so heavy. It was evident that more than one "crew" of robbers were at work.

I let myself down to the ground, and two men hit me at once. Both wore trainmen's caps.

"You fools!" I whispered. "I'm one of you! Where's Red Curtin?"

That got action. They saw the button then.

"Sorry, but I'm jittery as the devil," mumbled one of the men. "Red's up front. The express car."

I hurried away from them. One of them ran to the rear of the car. The other went up the steps of the car I'd just left. I slipped down into the ditch and ran along it to the front of the train. I had no plan. But Red Curtin would be there. Perhaps Kruger would be there, too.

AT THE express car air was escaping loudly. Somebody was bleeding the line.

Then I saw Curtin and his black bag. I knew it was Curtin by his squat shape. He wore a brakeman's cap.

"Get over to that telephone," he stage-whispered to another trainman. "Tell the dispatcher we'll be laid up here with a hot box." Curtin tossed over a ring of keys.

A man broke from the shadows, dashed over to a telephone box on a pole. Unlocking the box, he took down the receiver.

From the shadows I watched Curtin go on with his own work. He slapped some white

stuff, which likely was the putty he had bought, over a lump on the express door. Then he looked behind him. His partner was through with the telephone box and had jerked it off the post. Curtin lighted a short fuse and leaped into the ditch. A stick of dynamite was under that putty stuck to the door!

Almost at once there was a dull explosion. The express door ripped open. Curtin was out of the ditch in a moment, tossing a smoking gas bomb through the aperture. In another moment a man came staggering to the doorway, a pistol still clutched in his hand. Curtin caught his leg, jerked him to the ground and hit him. Then he picked up the pistol and hurled it into the gorselike brush that grew around me. It narrowly missed my head.

I found the pistol and stuck it into my belt. Watching Curtin, I tried to watch the length of the train as well. It was a stricken thing.

There were no houses near the deserted roadway, but in the distance on a hillside were the lights of a town or settlement. As yet there was no activity up front at the locomotive. Its headlight showed a smoke-blackened train tunnel straight ahead. I wondered if the engineer and fireman had been killed. If not, for all the help they could expect they might as well have been a thousand miles from civilization instead of a few miles from the boundaries of one of the largest cities in the country.

Curtin and his helper were inside the lighted express car now. Curtin looked like a man from Mars in his gas mask. I didn't wait. I knew what would happen now. Curtin was after what the express car held. I began moving cautiously across the whinstone and brush toward the dark shapes of motor cars on the dirt road—another of my wild ideas.

Some warning prickle on the back of my neck stopped me before I emerged from the dense brush. I stared. The leading motor car was long and black and glossy. It was *the* car. It made me think of the sweet fender-crusher.

And then I saw her. She stood tall and slender beside the car. What light there was showed a small automatic in her hand. She

was staring at where I was crouched. I strained my eyes, but could see no one with her.

I was afraid she was going to shoot, so I called her name.

"What — what?" she whispered back. "Who are you?"

"Gentleman Sam Kern." It was facetious and probably out of place, but I added: "Remember, I had a date with you."

Silence.

Then she whispered: "Sh-hh. Come here, *quick*."

I pushed the gun I had out of sight in my belt and joined her.

"Of all things," she said. "How'd you get here?" She saw the blue button on my coat and went "Oh!" Then she said, "Well, *well*!"

This was where the book said audacity came in.

I had to play it through, and fast.

"Kruger with you?" I asked.

SHE laughed bitterly.

"Not him. He's out making an alibi for himself in case things go wrong. We stooges take the chances!"

"Forget him. And put away your heater." I nodded at her gun.

She stared at me. I thought this might be the time for a little frankness.

"I wasn't really invited to this party. I cut myself in! Do you mind?"

She grabbed my arm.

"They're coming!"

I saw two men lunging toward us carrying a chest between them.

One of the men was certainly Curtin, trainsman's cap and all. He'd got what he had been commissioned to get.

Miss Estelle was breathing hard. "You know what the box is?"

"Sure," I said. "Part of the loot."

"It's *the* loot," she said. A bit of the breeze wafted her fragrance against me. She was close to me. "Look, this is what I meant when I wondered if I can trust you. This is it, the real thing! Did you mean what you said about liking to take me to Havana, to the Riviera? If you do, there's five million dollars in that chest coming our way! *Five million dollars!*"

LOVELY DOUBLE-CROSSER



QUICKLY I pulled up. The amount shocked me. So did Miss Estelle's words. She wanted me to do something about it. We didn't have much time. They were about here.

"Does Curtin know what's in the box?" I

asked her.

"No. He thinks it's securities."

"We'll grab it," I said. "Get the other man to go back to the train, and I'll take Curtin."

I slipped from one shadow to another behind the motor car as the two men arrived with their burden. They couldn't see me. I found the motor's engine running, throbbing softly in the dark like a lonely little child crying itself to sleep.

The men got the chest inside the back seat of the limousine.

"Get back to the train," Curtin hissed at the other man.

"Help the others, then scatter. Filter into the San Fernando address as soon as you can make it. We'll all have time before the general alarm's out. Now beat it."

He watched the man run toward the train. Then he swung around.

"All right, babe! Let's fog out of here."

"Don't call me babe," Estelle cried.

Curtin backed up from her, and then I hit him. A doctor once had shown me how to hit a man without killing him. The gun barrel was harder and heavier than I thought. Curtin's skull made a little plop that scared me.

I didn't want to kill him.

Estelle caught my arm. "Hit him again, honey!" she breathed.

"Maybe I've killed him already."

"That's what I mean. We've got to be sure. Hit him again—right behind the ear."

A chill ran up my spine. But this was no time for heroics. I pushed her away, then I slashed down with the gun barrel, hitting the ground at the side of his head. I

pulled him into the brush. Then I grabbed her arm.

"Let's get out of here, fast!"

She seemed satisfied. "You drive," she said, and ran around the car.

I got in under the steering wheel. Our next stop would be at Kruger's San Fernando hideout. Cleverly he had arranged it. Until the loot reached Kruger there was no way to incriminate him.

I SWUNG the car into the road as other men came running from the stalled train. The job was about finished.

"Hurry—hurry!" she admonished. "Straight ahead a half-mile is a paved road. Turn right and go up over the hill. You can use your lights."

I turned on the lights and stuck to my driving.

"After we're on the pavement there's plenty of time," she explained. "It's all planned carefully. The cars are all hot so they can be walked away from. Two cars besides ours will take the loot. The other men will stay here for ten minutes to hold back the passengers and the trainmen they've locked up. That'll give us time to get down into the Valley. With the phone smashed the train can get no help until they get up enough air or steam or something to go on through the tunnel and down to the next station. By that time we'll all be in the clear." Her hand flicked the gun from my belt and put it into her lap. "You don't need this, honey."

The hair began to stand up on my neck. I was a participant. Even more, I was driving the get-away car! I made the paved road, which was as deserted as the one we'd been on and then I really was custodian of five million dollars! Shoot me dead!

Miss Estelle laughed triumphantly. "We've done it! Darling, was I surprised to see you! You could have knocked me over with a feather."

"I was surprised myself," I admitted truthfully and joined in her hysterical laugh.

Five million dollars! A million pounds! Shoot me dead!

SOON we were racing up over the pass. At one point on the pass we could look down. The long line of passenger coaches, lighted from stem to stern, looked friendly and peaceful below. Miss Estelle said as much, but she didn't suggest that we park beside the road to gaze at the halcyon scene.

"A lot of men in on the divvy?" I asked, to be saying something. "How many altogether?"

"Twenty." She gave a short laugh. "With you, twenty-one." Miss Estelle thought she could afford to be talkative now. "Is Johnny Kruger going to be fooled! We're doublecrossing him, honey. We're doublecrossing everybody. We're the biggest doublecrossers in the world. I've got a little hideout apartment all lined up. I've had it for a week now, hoping something like this would break. That's where we are going. But Kruger was doublecrossing the men, too. The guarantee to the men is five grand. He got his men from all over the country. Out of jails, out on bond. Hand-picked. But Kruger was after the cream for himself. It's in this box we've got." She looked back at it lovingly.

"What is it?"

"Banknotes!" she cried jubilantly. "All big ones. From China. Before the war a gambling syndicate was operating all over the Far East, from Singapore to Hong Kong. They used all kinds of money, but they saved the American money, stashed it away in case there was a war. When the war did hit they tried to take a run for it in a chartered ship. The ship and all the members of the syndicate which were on it went down, and the ship's location was lost. Then two other syndicate members, working for years out of San Francisco, located the ship. The money was in a sealed chest. This is the money!"

I felt the perspiration pop out on my forehead. Swinging the car along the ridge of hills, I raced down into the Valley. Ahead were the lights of many cars. Something began coming up into my throat again. If it wasn't fear, then they'll have to get a new name for it.

I glanced at Miss Estelle and then every-

thing was all right. She was as lovely as a gardenia in the moonlight and she smelled as nice. She smiled at me and one hand came up to my cheek. Turning my face slightly, she kissed me hard on the lips. Then she pulled away.

I had to say something. "Why did the men want the money in L.A.?"

"I'll tell you," she said. "Sweetheart, I've just got to talk. The two syndicate members were broke by the time they got the chest of money. They smuggled the chest into the U.S., but even then they couldn't start tossing money around. Other syndicate members would have heard of it. So these two were going to Santa Anita."

"To play the ponies?"

She sniffed. "Of course. People win money at horse races as well as lose it. They'd say they had a system, that they were winning, say, a thousand a day or ten thousand a day for that matter. There's no way of checking up. You turn in the 'win' tickets to get paid off, the 'lose' tickets you take home for souvenirs or throw away. You can pick up handfuls off the floor. Even with the Government taking its share of the winnings it would have put these men on a solid footing. See?"

I said I did. But with the kiss and all I was as nervous as a Thames Valley hen hatching out ducklings. I looked for my gun in her lap. It was no longer there. Her little automatic was—and now it was pointing straight at me.

Shoot me dead! These women!

At that moment we passed under the first street light. I flicked a quick glance at her face. It had a sad smile turned my way. She shook her head contritely. She lifted the pistol, but it was still pointed at me, and the safety was off.

"Honey," she said. "I'm terribly sorry about this, but I can't take any chances. This is a five-million-dollar deal." Her voice came down from the Arctic. "If you make a wrong move, sweetheart, it'll be the last you ever make."

MY HAND trembling on the wheel told me Miss Estelle Richie wasn't joking. I could feel that bullet already sliding out

the muzzle of her gun. I got. "I thought we were pals," out through my teeth.

"We were. Heaven knows we were . . . Turn left here, honey."

When I did I saw that the lights I'd seen from above were cars, but they were running around tending to their own business. Suddenly the rest of my voice came back.

"It's a walk home?"

She said the same words without the lift at the end. She added in a soft huskiness:

"I like you a lot, and I'd love to play around with you. You've got all the answers, but I didn't get to see Kruger. You may be the law. Honey, I just can't take the chance. This way I can take it all."

She was serious. I felt sorry for her.

"Tell me something. How did Kruger know about the five million?"

She laughed. "He was one of the syndicate. He was playing the twenty men he picked up against the two to get the chest for himself. His men will get their divvy from the wallets and jewelry. Nobody, not even Curtin, knows what's in the chest. Only Kruger had to work with Curtin to get the chest."

I nodded, but I went cold inside. Now she had to kill me. I knew too much. It was too dark to see her face now as I drove to her directions. A wide boulevard in front of us had a cross sign that said:

SEPULVEDA

We crossed it and went on until we were able to angle off into a side street. It was too dark to see her features, but she was thinking hard, planning the thing out. J. B. Kruger was probably at the San Fernando hideout, waiting. But the five million would never arrive. Kruger would soon be frantic, even as the two nameless syndicate members on the California Flyer were already frantic.

"Turn left at the next corner," she said. "Be careful. Don't miss any boulevard stops."

"I won't," I said. I had little doubt that she would shoot me if I did. There was that kind of tightness about her mouth.

Ahead a boulevard stop winked and

blinked. Off in the east was a faint glow as though the moon was going to rise. I made the boulevard stop, rolling into it gently. I'd made the other stops—all right, but this time I let out the clutch without touching the gas. The motor bucked and died. I stamped around underfoot.

"Where's the starter?"

She was taken in—I *hoped* she was!

"It's there—on the dash!" she cried.

A fraction of a second her attention was divided to indicate the starter button. My hand reached for the button, then slashed back at her gun hand. It was a big chance, but I had to take it. I lunged forward in the seat at the same time.

The automatic went off—into the seat back. The gun fell to the floor of the car. But I had her by the arm now, dragging her across the seat under the wheel and out the door.

Miss Estelle Richie was a frightened girl when I pulled her from the car. I smiled at her. The night was still quiet outside. There were no cars coming or going. It was at one of those infrequent hiatuses of time and action you find in Southern California traffic. Yet two blocks away a steady stream of lighted motor cars and trucks hurried north and south on San Fernando Road, the main artery out of town.

I held her arm in my left hand. "Cheerio, old girl," I said. "This makes me top man again?"

"Oh, yes, honey." Her voice was a little uncertain again. "I didn't mean to—I just couldn't take a chance."

"I understand quite well," I told her. "Now where's the San Fernando hideout?"

Her lower lip became a little longer than the other, but she said:

"Straight ahead to San Fernando Road, then three blocks on it to LaMotte. Nineteen ninety-one is the number. But, honey, we're not going there." She attempted a smile. "Sam, don't you see, I had to play it this way, my way. After I got the chest put away, then I was coming back and get you."

"I was unaware of that. Do you have a supply of rope?"

"No, honey."

"That is certainly unfortunate, I assure

you. What I have to do now puts me in a bad light as a gentleman."

But please remember I wasn't Mr. Robert Shelley Enfield now, I was "Gentleman Sam" Kern from New Orleans and Saint Looney. I hit her hard on the point of her chin.

I PICKED her up and laid her on the back seat of the car. When I put her down her face was close to mine. Her perfume did things to me. She was breathing quietly now, like a little girl asleep at a lawn party. Bolder than I was, I kissed her.

One down, two to go. I felt so brave about what I'd done I could have got a cigarette lighted with both hands on a match, only I don't smoke.

She had picked a good road. I still had it to myself. A light came from far behind me, but it turned off as I watched it.

I had a weapon now. Two of them. I put Estelle's small automatic in my pocket, wiped off the other gun carefully and tossed it into the brush.

Before I'd gone half a block I clicked on the radio. I searched the air waves, running the gamut of radio stations—nothing. I left the radio on. The big car practically drove itself.

It was a nice car—like blazes it was! A wave of anger engulfed me. Here underfoot was the car that had reduced me to the status of a pedestrian. There was a eucalyptus tree at the side of the road. A substantial tree. I leaned the car against it. The fender crushed, screeching like a thing alive. I found myself yelling like a wild Indian.

CHAPTER X

CROOKS AT A DIVVY



BY THE time I rolled up to San Fernando Road with a smashed fender, I felt better. Swinging into the parking part of a service station, I turned off the lights. I had to take a chance on Miss Estelle remaining asleep. Inside, I asked the attendant if he'd go outside while

I telephoned. He agreed, but watched me bitterly all the time I was talking to James Madison.

James, still in his office, had got the phone on the first bounce. He had already heard the news of the train holdup. I didn't tell him I had five million dollars, but I did tell him I was on my way to the hideout at 1991 La-Motte Street.

"Don't, for Pete's sake, pull in the cops!" he said. "Let me do that. Maybe we can get a fee out of this thing yet. Hold them till I get there."

I lapsed into the vernacular of the underworld.

"Okay, but don't rush the place till I get outside. They've got twenty guns, James—but I've got what it takes to hold them there."

I hung up and ran back to my car, the attendant watching me curiously. Miss Fender-crusher apparently hadn't moved. The low radio music broke off—a news flash came on:

"This is Harvey Bailey again. Something more on that train robbery. . . . Never since the days of Jesse James has such a feat been accomplished. The California Flyer, as first reported, was held up by train robbers said to total fifty men. Nothing was known about the robbery until the engine thundered into the station at Northcrest to report the affair. Railroad officials say there will be no statement until the true facts of the case are known. There had been no intimation of other than mechanical trouble when the Flyer reported a hot box at the El Toreador siding. The passengers, who lost wallets, watches and other jewelry were mostly race fans coming south for the Santa Anita opening. Undisclosed is—"

I shut off the radio, got in and made my turn into San Fernando Road.

A block ahead cars lined the road. I thought it was a road block until I remembered that California frowned on such things. Skirting a traffic accident, I rolled on.

A sudden groan came from behind me. Miss Fender-crusher had fallen off the back seat. I reached back and pulled her head off the chest. She made funny noises when she tried to speak. I hoped I hadn't knocked any teeth loose.

"It's all right, babe," I told her. "We'll soon be home."

There was another service station corner and then LaMotte Street. I turned into it. Then I was driving on, with Estelle pounding her fists on my head. I had to stop the car to keep her from beating my brains out. I held her off.

"Quit it!" I cried. "Pull yourself together. You've got to have a story for Kruger!"

Breathing hard, she stared at me. But I didn't explain to her that the reason I was going to the rendezvous was to incriminate Kruger.

"Come up front," I invited.

She did, shaking her head dizzily. I turned on the dash light so she could find her purse. She didn't miss the gun. It was still in my coat pocket. Her mind was on a comb and lipstick and compact. Lips tight, she went to work. I knew her mind was working even faster than her fingers.

I gave her a little advice as we drove on.

"The best procedure is to inform Kruger you were delayed by a traffic accident. That you hit your chin on the steering wheel. You make up the story. Also tell him I belabored the man over the head who hit Red Curtin. I'll back you up. You can say I drove you here." I added almost gleefully, "If you do not think we've had an accident, kindly take a look at the front fender."

She wouldn't even look at me. Instead, she busied herself in the sun-visor mirror on her side. Behind us a gibbous moon rose reluctantly as though tired of its endless job.

"Now try and act nice," I said. "When you have time you can go back and search for your automatic in the bushes."

SHE still said nothing. A house loomed up ahead, along on the back of a lot. A car was just going in on the driveway. The car blinked once, then drove all the way back without lights. I asked Estelle if this was the house, and she nodded.

Swinging in, I turned off my lights, and drove in.

A man took form in the shadows. Mr. Kruger. Miss Estelle got out on her side and ran around the car. I got out. I had to hear her. What she said to Kruger was al-

most word for word what I had told her to say.

But Kruger's face was so filled with relief he hardly looked at me. He was peering into the back seat, worrying about the chest. Then he gave a long, satisfied sigh.

"Ah-h-h! Come on, give me a lift."

Inside the house he nearly dropped his end of the chest.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

I put my end down. "Me? I'm Gentleman Sam Kern. I got into this thing by accident. When somebody hit Red Curtin, I hit him and that did it. In short, mister, I'm cutting myself in!"

I hoped that made sense to him. It took an effort on my part to keep from handing him the bill for my car damages then and there.

Kruger gave me a long, searching look before he nodded. Maybe it was the blue button that reassured him. I put it in my pocket. I didn't need it now. But I had to be in character.

It was a five-room house, two bedrooms, a large living room. The usual living room furniture, such as an overstuffed couch, chairs. A radio was busy on the train robbery, talking about the James Brothers and the Missouri Pacific now.

Four men were inside the room. They wore no masks now, but they were as busy as they had been on the train. At least one vehicle had reached the hideout before the rest of us. Two men were kneeling over a dumped-out pile of wallets and other miscellany. They were ripping the wallets apart, digging out the currency and tossing the leather and papers aside. Two others were stacking the bills together by denominations and placing a rubber band around each package of money. It looked like a factory assembly.

The men grinned at us. It wasn't warm, but everybody was sweating.

"Give them a hand, will you?" Kruger said. "I've got some things I want to take care of."

He started back toward the kitchen. I went back with him. He didn't seem surprised at seeing me.

"Here, give me some help with this chest," he said. I helped him carry the chest into

one of the bedrooms. "Thanks," he said. "You help the boys. Tell Estelle to come here."

"I think I'll stay," I said quietly. "I've got a drag in this pot for getting it here. Go ahead and open it up."

Kruger's piercing eyes regarded me. "How much you figuring on?"

"The girl says there's five million dollars in this box. Give me twenty grand."

He frowned at the first part, and looked relieved at the second.

I saw Miss Estelle's shadow as much as I did her. Leaping back, I dodged. But I still felt the swish of a fire poker fan my cheeks. Estelle nearly fell over. She was off-balance. My fist licked out. Poor Estelle. Poor glass-chin Estelle. She would never be the lightweight champion of the country.

Kruger cursed and stepped forward, a gun in his fist.

"Don't be a sap," I told him. "Your Estelle was running out on you. She's got a hideaway apartment all ready. I had to hit her once before this to make her behave. She heard about that other dame of yours."

That made sense to the big man. He nodded to me, then he looked at the chest and licked his lips. He didn't look at his fallen lady love at all.

"You've got to have somebody to back you up," I said. "I'll back you up."

Kruger looked down at Estelle and sighed. Putting the gun away, he brought a hammer and a chisel from the corner. No part of the business had been overlooked. Kruger studied me a moment more, as though wondering if it might not be better to use the hammer on me. I showed him Estelle's small automatic, and he turned back to the chest.

The lock shattered like a piece of ice. Kruger jerked the lid up. A blanket of army gray covered what was inside. Kruger's hand trembled as he lifted the blanket.

UNDERNEATH was a sea of dull green.

Packages of currency. Thousand-dollar bills. Five-hundreds. Hundreds. Shoot me dead! I looked at Kruger. The army blanket he held was shaking like a flag in a stiff breeze.

Clomping steps came from outside the door and Kruger slammed the lid of the chest shut. Red Curtin stuck his face inside the door, then came in. When he saw the girl on the floor, he pulled up and stared at us. He stared at me and licked his lips. A gun leaped into his hand.

"You're the bird that hit me!" he raged.

"Cut it!" Kruger rasped. "He's the fellow who hit the man who conked you. He's all right. He brought the chest in."

A man outside rapped on the door. "Another boiler's coming in on the driveway."

"Take care of it, Red," said Kruger. "This bird's okay."

Red Curtin looked at the chest. As yet none of the men had put any importance on it. Then his little eyes looked at me balefully.

"What's the matter with the dame?"

"Fainted," I told him. I was still sweating with relief at seeing Curtin alive.

He hurried out and Kruger closed the door. This time he locked it. Eyes a little wild, he cried brokenly:

"Look, you've got more of a cut coming than the rest. We've got to work together!" He jerked the lid of the chest open. "We've got to ditch this stuff if we make it stick. Get busy." He began tossing the packages of money under the bed. "Take only the big denominations," he cried. "Hurry! Hurry!"

I was as excited as he. We tossed packages of money—millions of dollars—under that bed as though the packages were heads of lettuce. We were both breathing hard before Kruger called a halt.

"We got to leave some," he cried. There was still a covering of money on the floor of the chest. But it was in hundreds. Twenties.

I understood now. This was the way he planned to doublecross the men. He jerked a battered suitcase from the closet and dumped its contents—legal-looking documents—into the chest. He crammed the army blanket in on top.

I looked at Estelle then and he nodded. We lifted her to the bed. I put a pillow under her head. Kruger might have loved her or he might have been running out on her, I didn't know. But he was in love with five million

dollars now!

Unlocking the door, we carried the chest into the front room. We were just in time for the delegation that surged inside the side door of the house.

It came from the last machine to leave the train robbery. They were all here and accounted for now. This mob brought in another sack of wallets. Kruger greeted them jovially, but sweat was shiny on his face.

Kruger gave a few more orders, and said he thought it would be a good idea if a couple of the drivers got their cars out of the driveway. The cars might attract cruising cops. This was acted upon. I even offered to move my car, but Kruger said he needed it where it was.

He had thought of everything. He was a great organizer.

Soon the new men were working on the pile of wallets like Iowa farmers shucking corn. The stack of banknotes grew.

In the excitement they hardly noticed the chest. But now Kruger was taking out the legal papers and tossing them aside. He showed the money we had left to cover the bottom. Packages of currency were handed to Kruger who tossed them inside the chest. Curtin puffed rapidly at a cigar and watched the operation. He fingered a sheaf of currency and wiped his sleeve across his shiny brow.

"I'd better take a look at the girl," I told Kruger.

He shook his head and patted the key he had in his vest pocket.

"I'll take care of her," he said. "Don't worry."

His eyes were cold and he was starting to look at me queerly again. He was thinking. Something I had done beside the way I had hit Estelle was affecting him. I couldn't think what it was. Miss Estelle's attempt to kill me must have started a train of thought in Kruger.

I was holding the lid of the box for him, but I was counting my chances, not the money. It certainly wasn't the time to hand him the invoice for my car damages. There were twenty men and one woman in the house. All were my enemies. But the men, hypnotized by the sight of money, weren't worrying about me—yet.

CHAPTER XI

SENTENCED TO DIE



THE men were watching each other suspiciously, however. Kruger more than the others. He had more to gain, more to lose. The rasping, tearing noise of leather went on. Desecrated wallets were hurled aside. One of those wallets

would be mine.

I wondered about James Madison. Had I given him enough information? The radio program broke in again with a news flash. The men stopped ripping wallets and bags to listen.

"Latest reports from the robbery of the California Flyer. Railroad officials say only one box had been taken from the express car. This was thought to have been taken by mistake, as it was shipped as books. The registered mail and other valuable prizes had been overlooked. No estimate of the loss has yet been made."

I looked at Kruger, but Kruger wouldn't look at me.

"Two men are dead, another critically injured. Police say a roundup of known criminals is being made. It is believed that an Eastern gang had moved in. Passengers report that the train holdup was an orderly, well-timed, well-planned affair. Nevertheless the brutal murder of the two trainmen was unprovoked. This fact automatically sets the death penalty on each of the train robbers whether they be a dozen, or as some think, a full half-hundred."

I pulled up at hearing this unnecessary neurasthenia. I wasn't the only one affected. The men's eyes were white around the edges. One of the men ripped a wallet open with a sharp rasp. He cursed Red Curtin bitterly.

"Yuh didn't need to knock off them bozos."

There was an angry muttering from the others.

Curtin's cigar drooped.

"Now, men," J. B. Kruger cut in, "things like that happen. The thing to do is to get

the money divided and fade." He smiled around the circle of faces. "Who's going to identify you?"

The men looked at one another. There was grumbling and muttering and nervous laughter. The mob was as tense as coiled springs, as dangerous as nitro. Each man had a gun and a hot, sweaty trigger finger. It would take only a small spark to set off an explosion. These were mugs, racketeers, hoods and imported torpedos with no allegiance to anyone but themselves. It was a mob at a divvy.

When Kruger looked at me again, I saw the faintest signal come into his eyes. Kruger was worrying about Miss Estelle. Miss Estelle could pop off what the chest really had contained.

"I better take a look at the dame," I said again.

This time it registered. Kruger felt the urgency of it. He nodded, almost absently, fished the key out of his pocket.

"I'm sorry about the babe," he said a little sadly, "but that's the way it's got to be. See that she's quiet." His emphasis on the "quiet" meant a permanent condition.

Curtin looked at me suspiciously. "What's up?"

"The dame," I whispered. "She's breaking out again. We can't take a chance on her making trouble."

But I shouldn't have whispered. Men stopped with their hands full of money. Suspicion reared its head. The muttering started again. Tension was mounting, like a defective tire about to burst. But I was an unknown quantity to them. One of them, especially, was staring at me. It was old Coatless of the train. I forced a grin his way.

"Don't forget Cylinder the Second in the fifth," I said, I thought a little foolishly.

But he actually grinned back. I was sorry for him. I liked him.

I picked up a package of twenties from the chest, thumbed through it and tossed the package back where it belonged. I started toward the back room. Curtin followed me. If I was to be the hatchet man for the mob, he meant to see that the job was carried out.

But Kruger stopped that.

"This is about it, fellows!" he cried.

He had a handful of paper money in each hand. How much he had in his pockets was questionable. How much any of the others had in their pockets also was a question. If there was honor amongst thieves it wasn't bearing itself out here. Yet this money in his hands held their eyes. The last of the wallets had been shucked free of its contents. Private papers, draft cards, membership and automobile registration cards littered the floor. Who cared about them?

"There's a few bonds and certificates, watches and jewelry in the loot," Kruger said, "but this has got to be fenced. This lettuce is different." He wriggled the packages of bills in his hands. "Here's my idea on the matter. See what you think of it. I guaranteed you each five grand on the deal. It looks like we can up that figure a little, but I don't know how much. So, you can take five grand now and come back here in a week from now for another cut, or you can take six grand tonight for a full share. There's enough to pay that much. It's up to you, men. Either way is okay by me."

CURTIN, who had a larger cut coming to him, waddled back to shill the deal and start the ball rolling.

"That sounds fair," he said. "Plenty fair. Me, I'm taking the six grand and getting out of here."

I did my part despite the cigar and cigarette smoke that was so thick I had a feeling of uneasiness inside me.

"Count me in on the six grand," I called back. "I don't want to come back and monkey with chicken feed." I said to Kruger: "I'll see what Slim out here wants." Slim, I'd learned, was the man on guard outside.

"Do that," Kruger said, but he knew that I was on my way to see his ex-inamorata.

I started toward the back bedroom again. This time Curtin didn't follow me. He wanted to see the money distributed.

The bedroom appeared to have been as I'd seen it before. Miss Estelle Richie still lay crosswise on the bed. There was a lot of white flesh showing. But I was cagey. I stood inside the door and ran my eye quickly over the room, trying not to miss one detail of it. I might as well be a good detective if I was

going to be one.

I looked under the bed. The money was still there. I knelt there with two packages of bills in my hands. Miss Estelle seemed to be breathing steadily enough. Jacket pulled back, her face toward me, her beautiful white throat was on the same level as my eyes. Her blouse was white with a blue ribbon threaded through it. She wore nothing under it. Yet there was a bit of drab green showing. It didn't go with the rest of the picture at all. It seemed no place for a package of high-denomination currency.

I got off my knees. "Miss Estelle," I whispered, but she didn't move an eyelash. If she wasn't asleep she was a good actress. She let me raise her shoulders like a little girl too sleepy to hold up her head.

She looked lovely and desirable, her dark lashes lying against her pale cheeks. Willing red lips were parted as though waiting to be kissed. It was hard to believe that this was the girl who had begged me to murder Red Curtin while he was unconscious, or the girl who had intended to kill me.

I knew she was dynamite, yet I lingered. Her lips, still parted, were a challenge. When I kissed them they responded, moving gently against mine.

"I'm sorry it had to be like this, old girl," I told her sadly.

Letting her down gently, I went out the door, locking it after me. Sliding past the hallway, I saw Kruger counting money in the front room. "One, two . . . five . . . six thousand." Curtin was helping him. I opened the side door and a wedge of light made a lighted pattern on the ground.

"Oh, Slim!" I whispered into the night. A tall, funereal-looking individual stepped through the wedge of light. "Kruger wants you inside," I told him. "The divvy. I'll spell you."

He almost dashed past me. When the door closed after him, I walked off into the night.

The blinding rays of a flashlight suddenly transfixed me. When I pulled up I saw an extended pistol in the back-flood of light.

"Stand still!" ordered a voice. "Keep your hands in sight!"

Blinking, I whispered: "Where's Madison?"

"Get Madison," somebody said, to my relief. "He's up front."

I relaxed, feeling better. The light dropped, but a voice cautioned:

"Don't move. I've still got you covered."

The sound of running feet came through the night. The flashlight showed me to my unseen audience again.

"It's him," said a familiar voice and the light went out. "How's things, Robert?" Madison was slapping my shoulder then. "We've got the place surrounded. Come on over here to the car. This is Captain Budd."

I acknowledged the introduction.

"I thought it was time to come outside for a breath of fresh air," I explained. "I fear also that I was rapidly becoming a persona non grata."

"Sure, sure," said the big police captain. "As soon as you get around to it, boys, you can tell me who hired you to investigate the mob."

James had the answer ready. "A private matter," he said.

IN THE dashlight of the police car I rapidly sketched out a map of the house, the location of the doors, windows and possible exits. There were at least two vacant lots on each side of the hideout house. I got it all down for them. I told them there were twenty men and one girl inside. All the loot was there.

Captain Budd rubbed his hands. "That's fine. This is the biggest criminal story of the age." He gave a few more orders.

Two police cars without lights parked in front, facing the house. Two more rolled into the alley, their unlighted spotlights trained on the house. Submachine-guns were set up, one in front, one in back. Other police cars would drive in on the vacant lots. A loud-speaker had been set up. It wasn't fair. The cops had everything. All they needed was door prizes and a fan dancer. They could have sold tickets, ringside to balcony.

The house was dark, the blinds all down. Only the presence of the black car in the driveway indicated there were people home. But I knew who and what was inside, and shuddered.

"How much you figure they got inside?"

James Madison asked.

"Five million dollars, James."

He whistled under his breath. "And they let you walk out, just like that!"

I agreed. "I am not unaware that these Philistines are desperate men. I outwitted them, James. Perhaps you have forgotten that it was necessary that I be outside when the shooting starts."

A fresh police car was coasting into the alley. Behind it was another, dark and sinister and bristling with guns. They moved past and drove in through the weeds of the vacant lot. I wouldn't have been surprised to see a bulldozer move in also. What chance do criminals have, I wanted to know.

James Madison was mumbling at my side. "Somebody ought to be paying us a fee. Two men at thirty per day. (James had gone up in price.) Hey, wait a minute! There ought to be a lot of reward money on these fellows. What we need is an exclusive newspaper reporter. If we get our names at the top we can show prior rights to anything that might come up. Hey, I know a reporter who lives in the Valley. He'll wake up running."

James Madison strode over to the house that had the telephone.

Captain Budd hustled up to me. "Look, young fellow, you stay close to me. Come on, we'll get over to that loudspeaker."

I went with him. We sat behind bullet-proof glass, the captain and I. Captain Budd had a transmitter in his hands. He touched a button. The police siren whined, and the whole neighborhood burst into light.

The house was set off in a blaze of light. If the lawn were in better shape and cut, if the paint had been a little newer, it might have been a model house at an exposition.

I strained forward and stared. I knew what was happening inside that house. I could see the whites of the men's eyes, hear their curses. They would all be looking at Kruger. Every man's gun would be in his hand. Then they would miss me.

Captain Budd began talking into the microphone.

"You're surrounded, men! Come out—in single file!"

No answer came from the house. The quiet of long past midnight settled down on

us again. The scene was uncanny. Weird. At least a dozen lights were pointed at the house now. The captain took the cigarette out of his mouth and snuffed it out. He spoke into the microphone again.

"Come on out! You're surrounded. Put down your guns and come out, hands up, single file. We'll give you five minutes before we use the gas."

The captain shook his head at me and lighted another cigarette. He looked around. He picked up another transmitter and said:

"Seven-o-six reporting. Everything under control. Gang bottled up at Nineteen-ninety-one LaMotte Street. House surrounded. Lit up like a Christmas tree. Budd."

James Madison edged up to the far window. "Can you give the fellows another five minutes?" I knew what Madison was driving at.

I played along. "There's a girl in there," I told Budd.

The loudspeaker blared out like a public address system at a night ball game.

"Your last chance, men! Let the girl come out! The girl! Let the girl come out!"

We watched the side door for five minutes. The front door had a wide porch that blazed in a spotlight. We expected no business there. The minutes dragged on. No girl.

Somebody pushed up from behind the captain's car.

"I'm Ed Dalles of the *Tribune*. I got a photographer with me. How do you expect a fellow to sleep with those lights shooting all over the Valley?"

Budd blinked at Madison. "I might have known."

CHAPTER XII

JUST FOR EVIDENCE



MADISON nudged me, and I brought Dalles up to date. Dalles was putting it down like mad. His photographer made a picture. James Madison looked on fondly. You would have thought the Wide Awake Agency had just taken over Pinkerton's.

My picture was snapped and I told them I'd take a half dozen—

A shot sounded. Muffled. The sound came from the house. Suddenly the side door was blackened with the shapes of men. Their guns blazed. Two of the searchlights splintered out. The night turned hideous with shots. The police guns chattered and snapped. And then the silence crept back again. The train robbers were back inside again, all but three, who lay on their faces in the dust.

Budd sang out an order. Gas shells lobbed into the windows. The fight was over. Men staggered out of the house, coughing and cursing.

A wave of compassion swept over me when I saw Miss Estelle. One hand to her face, she was clinging with the other to a man she had likely never seen before. I wiped the back of my hand across my lips and watched the procession. The mob that lined up in the vacant lot constituted a sad and strange sight indeed.

The photographer began popping pictures as though he had bought his film at a surplus sale. Dalles was scribbling furiously as Madison called off the names of some of the train robbers. Then the reporter was running for a telephone.

The officers did a successful job of frisking the men. Men's pockets were emptied of packages of banknotes, the divvy. But that wasn't all. There were loose bills, watches and wallets each man had filched from the common pool. Kruger himself had two packages of high-denomination banknotes hidden in his hip pocket.

The officers in a spirit of gallantry would have passed Miss Estelle for the present, but J. B. Kruger smiled insolently and shook his head. This was the end for her as it was for him. He knew he was through and he—laughed.

"You might as well have it all," he cried savagely, and ripped the girl's blouse away.

There was a display of white flesh and of banknotes cascading to the ground. I averted my eyes. Shoot me dead!

But something had made me think of Miss Alice. I flushed guiltily. She had been out of my mind for some time. But I was back

on what James called the beam again. By the time Dalles had returned I had the invoice from the auto repair handy; I was ready for the *coup de grace*.

"If you want the real story, follow me," I told Dalles.

This was the moment. The big moment for which I had worked and waited. I had it all worked out. Out there at bay was the man who had laughed, and out there was Miss Fender-crusher. It was my turn to laugh. I would make a speech, informing them what they had lost by their traffic discourtesy, that by their disservice to me, they had lost their freedom and five million dollars. Shoot me dead!

I moved ahead, Dalles following. But we stopped in the shadows. Kruger and Miss Estelle stood there, shielding their eyes from glaring lights of the impromptu line-up. Miss Estelle held her torn blouse against her breast. She and Kruger were handcuffed together and the starch was gone out of them. They had been on top, now they were in the depths. They were like captured wild animals, dazed and bewildered. Curtin wasn't in the line-up.

As I looked at them the exultation of success drained out of me. The things I was going to say stuck in my throat. They were murderers, yet their cup of misery was already full. I couldn't make myself add anything to it.

I circled toward the house, Dalles right at my heels.

"Hey," he cried, "what's the idea? You said you had a bigger story."

James Madison joined us in time to hear that last. He looked at me curiously but said nothing. I shook my head to both of them and moved on.

Behind us the officers were noisily loading their police cars.

A policeman had opened the doors and window, and the gas was nearly gone from the house. When we filed inside, the first thing we saw was Curtin's lifeless body slumped on a chair.

"Killed by his own mob," I told my companions, waving Dalles' attention to the littered room. "Here's your story. Five million dollars' worth." I waved toward the other

room. "Some in there, but the rest of it's under the bed!"

CAPTAIN BUDD rushed inside, face sweating, beaming with triumph. You would have thought he had rounded up the train robbers single-handed.

"Never saw anything like this!" he declared. "Come on, Sergeant Miller, get the money together!"

Sergeant Miller moved the bed and his men began sweeping up banknotes as though they were autumn leaves. Madison whistled when he looked at the pile of ripped and discarded wallets, the identification cards and miscellany that littered the floor.

"What a job this is going to be returning this mess to the owners!"

"You said it!" cried Captain Budd. He swung around to us. "Don't you fellows run away."

"Of course not," said James. Then he and I moved toward the door and hurried off into the night.

"Budd would shoot a fellow's hand off if they touched any of that money," Madison said. "There's an honest cop."

* * * * *

"You tired?" Madison asked me some hours later.

His feet were on his battered desk. A nicely-filled bottle of the red life-blood of California stood at his side. Two glasses, one fully encrusted, the other with a faint reddish tinge, were on the desk between us. The funicular railway was silent, its two cable cars asleep halfway up the track like chickens on their roost.

"Me tired?" I asked. "I never get tired." I poured out liquid until my glass glowed redly. "This is not an unexciting life, James," I told him. "Although the methods are at times a bit uncouth, I rather favor the work. In all modesty I have demonstrated that I can cope with the criminal mind. Do you think my earning capacity might transcend the weekly wage with which I started? In short, James, I could use more than the forty-five dollars per week."

The rugged individual wiped a hand through his shaggy mane and grinned.

"I think we might be able to work it out."

"Thank you." There was another question bothering me. "James, tell me this, please—do I look like a man who would hit a woman?"

He studied me.

"Yes," he said, and added: Under certain circumstances."

I was glad to drop the subject. "What will happen to all that money, James?"

James lighted a cigar. I picked up another cigar and absently lighted it while waiting for his answer. He pondered, for after all, a five-million-dollar question is not a small one.

"The horse players riding that train will come out all right," he said pontifically. "There was a case where some men in a gambling house were robbed. When the cops caught the mob, each person who had been robbed put in a claim for the amount he'd assertedly lost. The totals of the claim of loss were double what the bandits actually had taken. So each customer got a portion of the house money. That's likely what will happen here. The losers will be paid out of the kitty. If a thousand passengers put in a claim for five thousand each that makes it—five million." He laughed. "Yes, this is going to be one time the horse players all win!"

I looked at him closely. "One thing more, James. Miss Alice Faire, of whom, to put it bluntly, I am very fond, was not in the employ of Latimer Perfume Company. Miss Estelle Richie, for whom I have no feelings whatsoever, was the receptionist for the now defunct company. She inferred that there were no other girls employed by them. This, of course, leaves a question in my mind. I will not sleep until I find out just where Miss Alice is employed. I have a haunting fear—" I tapped my lighted cigar on the ash tray.

James Madison grinned.

"Put your head upon a pillow, Robert," he said. "Worry no more. I wanted to put you in right with your girl friend, so I stopped in to see her."

I sat up. "You did, James?" My voice was eager. But only for a moment. Miss Faire *did* work on the fifth floor of the Equitable Central. She wasn't employed by the Latimer Perfume Company, and it was almost certain

that she wasn't employed by the Western Chelsoe Mining Company. She could have told me about them without compunction."

I stared at James Madison. The smoke from my cigar made my stomach feel a little uneasy as I listened to James.

"—and this big, tall bozo with the stern countenance says, 'We don't like to have outsiders visit with our models.' I told him it was extremely important. She came out then, and—"

"No, James," I interrupted. But the question had to be asked. "Do you wish me to believe that Miss Alice Faire is employed by the Love-li Nan?"

THE rugged individual nodded with far more enthusiasm than I thought was warranted. His look toward the ceiling was that of a man who had pleasant memories of his youth.

"Man," he said, "is she a dish! She models—"

"Don't say it, James!" I said coldly. "I do not wish to hear any more."

It was plain enough to me now. The only reason Miss Alice didn't want me to know where she was working was that she didn't want me to know she was using her slim, white body to model brassieres. Shoot me dead!

"No, James," I said. "I do not wish to hear anything more. Yet you may tell me her exact words when you explained my reasons for the seemingly unwarranted manner that I broke our various appointments."

"I was coming to that." Madison rubbed his chin. "If you want her exact words, she said to tell you to go to the hot place."

I was silent for some moments. Yet I wanted James Madison to know exactly where I stood. I was no cad.

"James," I said, "I am forced to admit my fondness for, and my willingness to protect, Miss Alice. The thought that she uses her body in the capacity you mention is untenable. I must protect her by an immediate offer of marriage."

I hesitated and looked at James. He was staring dreamily into his drinking glass. It was doubtful that he was even listening to me. His face was a little blurry as though

out of focus through my cigar smoke. A strange uneasiness was coming over me. I looked at my cigar with distaste.

"I have often felt better than I do now," I told him. When he did not respond, I said sharply: "James!"

"Huh?"

"James," I said again, putting down the cigar. "I think I am going to be sick."

"I'm already sick," he groaned. "No money, and me with a hot tip from San Francisco. Cylinder the Second in the fifth."

"What—what did you say, James?"

He looked at me bleary-eyed.

"That's the horse's name. Did you ever hear of him?"

I racked my brain as I stared at his blurred image. "I remember something. Seems like a very good horse."

"But it won't do us any good," he said dismally. "And that's not all we may miss. That chest of money might even be declared in the public domain, and we didn't even put in a claim for it!"

"James," I said weakly, "I thought of

that, too." Reaching into my inside coat pocket, I pulled out two flat packages of banknotes. "I selected these for evidence and for a possible fee if such be indicated." Tossing the packages to the desk in front of him, I said, "The big package, James, is composed solely of thousand-dollar bills; the other, of lesser denominations. Place it all on Mr. Cylinder, if you wish, James."

I got up then. Fleeing the trailing cigar smoke reaching out for me, I began running for the rest room knowing instinctively that I would never make it. Rarely have I felt as poorly as I did at this moment.

What happened after this is history. James put the money on the horse, the chest of syndicate money was divided among the trainful of horse players from San Francisco, and J. B. Kruger and Miss Estelle Richie were put where they couldn't smash any more fenders.

If you consult the form chart for the fifth race at Santa Anita you can see who won. It wasn't Cylinder II.

Shoot me dead!

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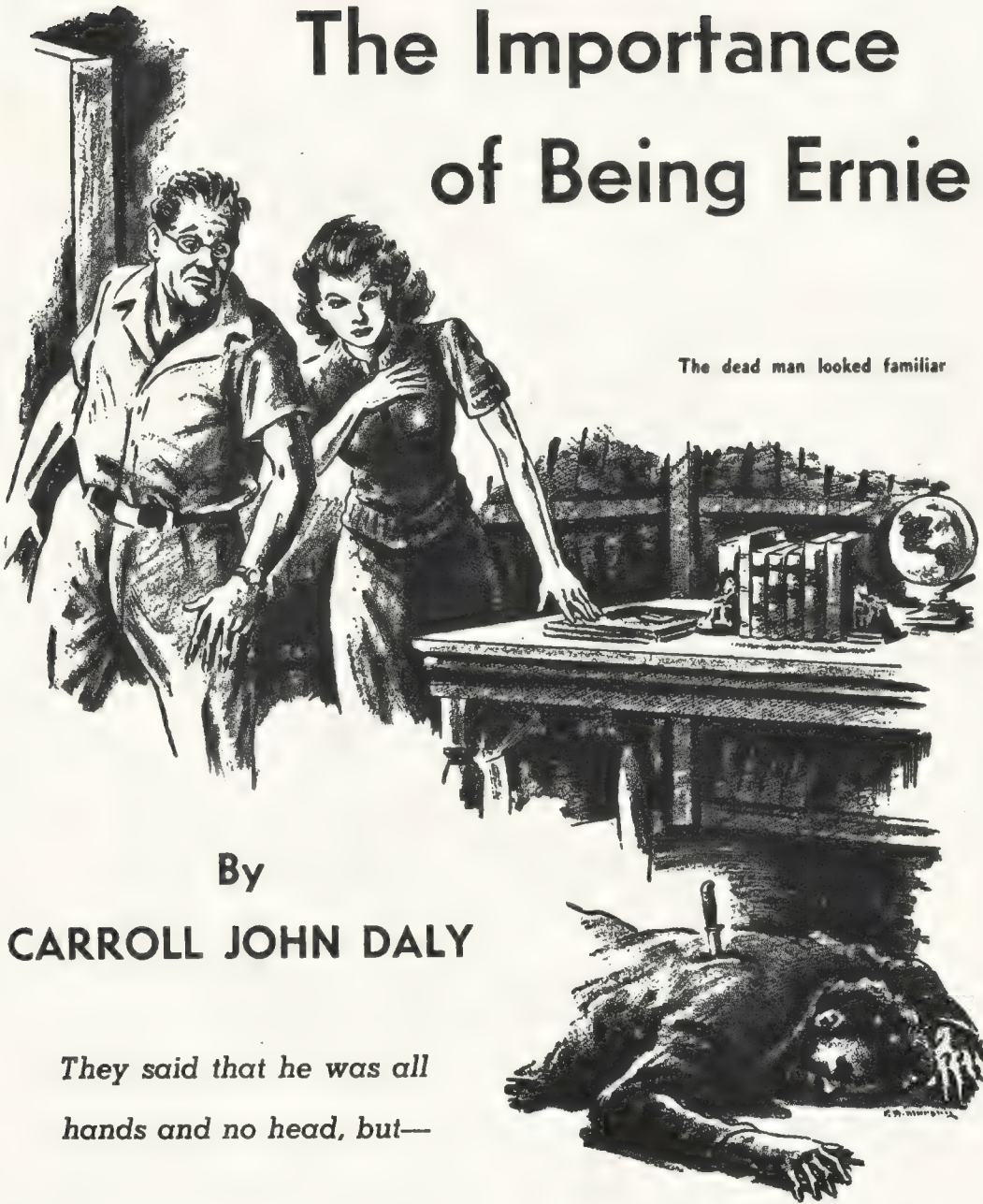
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The Importance of Being Ernie



The dead man looked familiar

By
CARROLL JOHN DALY

*They said that he was all
hands and no head, but—*

THE first time I saw Ernie he sat on the high stool bending over his work bench, juggling a chess piece in his long slender fingers. Then he looked up at the brisk middle-aged man with the waxed mustaches.

"A knight," Ernie said, holding it up to

the light. "Very nicely carved. Italian workmanship you say. No, sir, I'm not interested in doing a complete set of chess men for you at any price. On and off it would take months, not counting the polishing. It would have to be a labor of—of friendship, and I don't have friends—not

any more."

When the man had gone Ernie walked over and took the Dresden lamp out of my hands, examined it critically; noted the missing handle and the nick at the base.

"Sure, sure, mister," he said. "If it can be done with the hands, I can do it. Not a very fine piece this; could be replaced at an auction for less than the cost of fixing it up. Sentiment?"

Maybe I reddened. A hard-headed business man does not like to be called sentimental. I said:

"I retired and bought a little place here across the street from the public library. This lamp is the last of the old things. I like to have it around. I'm willing to pay more than—"

"All right," he interrupted me as he put the lamp gently on a shelf. "It won't cost you too much." He made out a tag, saying as he wrote, "Mr. Norton, of the little white house."

I was to learn a lot about Ernie in the next three years. All hands and no head they said in town. But he had a heart. Hours of his time were spent repairing dolls for children who would have no other doll—no matter how expensive. If you valued something in money alone, you might as well not bring it to Ernie. But you needed very little money or none at all if your attachment was simply sentiment, and if the loss inside of you, as Ernie put it, was desperate.

"It isn't all sentiment," Ernie told me once. "Sometimes it's fear. That's why people come to me to make keys. Keys they lost they shouldn't have lost. Like a lad in a bank or a jewelry store or a trusted watchman, perhaps."

ONE day a year or so later when I visited Ernie, before going to the library, he pointed to the book in my hand.

"Detective story, eh? Used to read them but I got so I knew who the murderer was before I was half through the book. That took the interest away. No head, eh?" he chuckled but I could see it rankled with him. "You tell me about that book, and like as not I'll name the killer for you. I'm gifted that way."

I did and he spotted the murderer by the time I had listed all the suspects.

"But," I said before I left. "You may have read that book—and forgotten you read it, I mean. I'll be getting a new mystery tomorrow at the library. Miss Anna May is varnishing it today."

"Perhaps that was it," he said slowly, and looking out his side window on the date garden across the lane, "What'll be the name of the detective story Miss Anna May is holding for you?"

I told him, and went up to the library. It was a few minutes after two o'clock and Miss Anna May came scurrying up. She greeted me in her cheerful way. I followed her into the library and watched her go into the back room behind her desk to hang up her jacket. I could see her shadow moving back and forth through the crack in the knotty pine.

That, I guess, was the start of Ernie using his head—at least so far as murder mysteries were concerned. Many times I would read the books and tell the stories to Ernie, and he'd rattle off the identity of the killer with a monotonous regularity. Sometimes he'd get as many as six out of eight and often the other two on a second guess—or reflection as he called it.

I discussed it once with Chief Hanover of the local police and, to my indignation, he laughed at me when I suggested he would do well to consult with Ernie on his crime problems.

"Hands and heart—yes, I'll grant you that, Mr. Norton," the chief told me. "But Ernie hasn't any head—never had."

Then there was my life-long friend Marvin Hines, of the Hines Detective Agency, now also retired, who spent his winters at Palm Springs a few miles up the line from Cino and who used to play chess with me once a week. He fancied himself somewhat as a psychologist and that was the way he laughed off my praise—my continued praise of Ernie's detective abilities.

"Clues?" Marvin scoffed. "Nine times out of ten clues are products of the imagination, George. In the detective business it's foot work, not head work. A lot of questions and a lot of answers, and the stupidity of the criminal furnishes the solution, rather than

the brilliancy of the detective—that, and certainly all kinds of luck.”

“All right,” I kept at him. “You’re a detective. How does Ernie do it then—for he does do it.”

“I don’t know.” Marvin grinned at me. “Perhaps you present the cases from the books well—too well,” and when I denied that vehemently, “I mean subconsciously, George. You like the old man. You know he gets a kick out of being important. In fact, you’ve told me it has added years to his life, just to find someone who believes he can use his head—as well as his hands.”

Cino was a desert town in winter. I was a fortunate man indeed. The days passed pleasantly. I could stand at my window and watch Miss Anna May hurry, each afternoon at two o’clock, up to the public library door. I could see her again at nine pull down the shades and carefully tuck in the drapes before she left for the night.

One afternoon I stood by my window, a couple of books under my arm, waiting for Miss Anna May to come up Oasis Street and open the library. She came, turning into Oasis from Fargo Avenue, almost skipping across the street for she was three minutes late.

I left the window as Miss Anna May went into the library and was opening my front door when she came out again.

She was not then the neat efficient little lady I had seen a minute before. Her hair was disheveled as if she had run a hand hastily through it. Her blue sweater was open at the neck as she clutched it with her left hand. Her right hand went up and swept the glasses from her nose as if they blocked her vision. Only the thin gold chain saved them from destruction. She stood on the library steps, the door open behind her, her mouth hanging open, as if she were intending to scream. Yet no sound came. Then I was across the street, to her.

THINGS were a little hectic after that. I know Miss Anna May pointed into the library and I know I looked and saw the man lying there on the floor by the magazine table. There was a long bladed knife sticking out of his back; almost the middle of his

back. I know that his face was familiar, that I had seen him in town—but I wasn’t quite sure where.

By the time I reached the door again, old Mr. Shultz, who worked a good deal in his garden, had come up from the corner. Mrs. Fisher was there, and a lady with her hair up in curlers who must have been Mrs. Raskin. One thought was in my mind. Ernie. Here was a chance for Ernie to vindicate himself—and me! I did tell Miss Anna May, who had now found her voice and was telling everyone of the shock she had; not to touch anything and to call the police. Then I was around the side of the library and running down the lane to Ernie’s shop in the front room of his shack.

Ernie protested all the way back to the library but he came. The police were there when we pushed through the little knot of people in the doorway. Two officers from a prowler car, a state trooper and Chief Hanover himself. Even as we paused in the doorway, young Doctor Martin Ferris brushed by us, for I suppose in a way he was the coroner while his father was ill.

Chief Hanover looked up sharply, smiled at me for, being retired and having a balance at the bank, I rated a bit in Cino. Then he saw Ernie and the smile went. He said abruptly:

“Come, come! We can’t have the whole town cluttering up the place. You’re different, Mr. Norton—having found the body, in a manner of speaking. Outside, Ernie!”

I’m not sure exactly what I said. Afterward Miss Anna May told me I did very well and was very dignified, but I know I said something about the Chief not being above having help from a man “qualified—I might say eminently qualified—in crimes of violence, if things go wrong.”

The chief muttered about the dead man being Mr. Porter—Emile Porter from the bank—and that we’d need all our wits about us. He looked at the dead man again and evidently decided that he wasn’t going to have it said he refused help. Anyway he made no further, at least outright, objection to Ernie.

Ernie held his ground, even advanced cautiously into the room. The state trooper

grinned at me. Doctor Ferris put down his bag and knelt by the body.

"Wrong, wrong?" Chief Hanover said but there was no confidence in his voice for he was evidently ill equipped to cope with a crime of this kind. "Things won't go wrong. But he's been dead some time and the killer has a start. And what was Mr. Porter doing in the library in the night—for it was in the night, wasn't it, Doctor?"

Miss Anna May in the background, "Mr. Porter was chairman of the Library Board, which you well know, Chief Hanover. He had a key as all board members have—and he had a right to be in the library at any time day or night, I should think."

"Dead twelve hours," said Doctor Ferris without looking up. "Maybe more—hardly less. Died instantly—knife severed his spinal cord, I think."

We stood around while the doctor examined the body gingerly, and the Chief, less gingerly, went through the dead man's pockets. More people crowded in at the library door until the Chief sent one of the uniformed men to keep them outside. Only Ernie moved around. I was a little proud of the way he went to work. He behaved as if he knew exactly what he was doing and exactly what he was looking for. Occasionally he examined a book shelf, and once he pulled out a book.

Then I saw the magnifying glass—a rather large one on a long handle. I saw him examine ashes, evidently tobacco ashes on a shelf; and more ashes on the floor. He knelt down in true Sherlock Holmes fashion and went over the floor crawling about with the glass close to his right eye and his right eye close to the floor. Then he found a small thread—a tiny bit of lint near the dead man's hand.

"Well," said the chief irritably, "what's that? Haven't solved things, have you?"

"Solved things?" There was a smile on Ernie's lips and a light in his round black eyes. "No, not quite." He held up the thread. "I must find the button that was torn from the murderer's coat. That this is part of the material, I have no doubt." And as the chief started to speak, "No, no—let us reconstruct the crime as it happened, for

we know how it happened. Then, perhaps, we can locate the missing button."

A LONG pause followed; then Ernie began, his voice gaining in confidence as he talked:

"Gentlemen: Mr. Porter came to the library for a purpose. It was to meet the man who so foully murdered him—whether by appointment or to confront him with some accusation, is, for the moment, entirely speculative. Mr. Porter arrived first. He walked up and down smoking a cigarette. The ashes on the floor tell us that. Then he went to the book case and drew out this book. The marks of it being dragged through some ash he inadvertently dropped upon the shelf tells us that." Ernie went to the shelf again and pulled out a large book. "'Glacial Foundations,'" he read the title aloud. "But Mr. Porter was not interested in the contents of the book. At least, he was not interested in the literary contents of the book—but he was interested in this."

Ernie held the book up, riffled the pages and shook it. A number of bills fell to the floor; fifties and hundreds. There was two thousand dollars all told when the amazed Chief Hanover got through counting the money.

"But," Ernie shook his head, "I do not believe Mr. Porter was interested in the money, for he did not remove it from the book and place it in his own pocket. I think the money was put there for the murderer. Mr. Porter somehow knew that—and was waiting to confront the man when he came for the money. What a fine way for one crook to pass money to another crook without meeting him or ever seeing him or being seen with him. And what a book—'Glacial Foundations'—not apt to be read in a desert library. But—we must find the missing button."

Suddenly Ernie knelt on the floor again, not far from the body and, with his pen knife, pried loose a small board. It came up easily. His hand went inside and appeared almost at once with a button and a bit of cloth—expensive brown cloth attached to that button, as if it had been violently torn from some garment.

"But Ernie," I gasped. "I know that board was loose but it had been fixed. How did the button get there?"

Ernie smiled and nodded at me.

"Look," he said, dropping the board back in place. "The killer came up behind Mr. Porter with the knife under his coat. Under his top coat, for the night was chilly enough to warrant one. He was a small man—say five feet seven or eight. He struck upwards with the knife, his left foot coming forward like this to lend force to the blow. So . . ."

Ernie's left foot stamped forward and the board bounced up, hung so a few seconds, then settled back again.

"You see," said Ernie. "Mr. Porter reached back spasmodically—tore off the button, received the knife in his back and fell forward. The button was knocked from his hand, and rolled into the opening just before the board settled down again."

"Ernie is right, Chief," Doctor Ferris said. "The blow came from below. So the man must have been smaller than the corpse here—Porter was well over six feet."

"Come, Mr. Norton," Ernie said to me. "I noticed signs outside of a car in the lane by the library, near the far window with the hole in the shade. Let us see what we can find there."

This time we had an audience that the police kept only partially back. Ernie found the cigar butt almost at once in the hedge. He smelled it—examined it carefully, flattened it out between his fingers; put the magnifying glass carefully on it, talking to himself. He was saying:

"Expensive tobacco—very. No teeth marks—none at all. Most extraordinary. Ah!" He snapped his fingers. "Why would a man step forward before he struck the fatal blow? Wouldn't he simply bend both knees slightly and then . . . But of course! He stepped forward on his good leg."

"On his good leg," gasped the chief. "Did he have a bad one?"

"Undoubtedly," said Ernie. "That's quite clear. He had a wooden leg."

ERNIE FACED the pop-eyed chief, the bewildered trooper, and the smiling doctor—and I guess the gloating me—for I was

very, very proud of Ernie, he finished it off in great style.

"There you are, Chief," he said, "and please leave me out of it. Your murderer was a heavy set man with powerful arms; witness the force of the blow he struck with the knife. There is a button missing from an expensive brown top coat. The killer had a wooden leg—I would say it was the left one. He smoked cigars that could hardly cost less than a dollar each and were made to order for him. Also he had no teeth; at least he wore no teeth last night. So we must assume he is temporarily without them or has something wrong with his mouth that forbids the use of store teeth."

"Good lord!" gasped the chief. "Blair Henderson, of Palm Springs. One leg, no teeth, no doubt has his cigars rolled in Pedro's Tobacco Shop, and yes—there are rumors that he runs wet Mexicans across the border—hundreds of them—thousands of them maybe." He looked at the book, "Glacial Foundations," he still held in his hand. "So that is how they made the payoff. But what was Emile Porter doing in the library with him?"

"Really." Ernie smiled indulgently; then went on as if he was addressing a child: "Does it matter. We know Porter was here and that he was killed and who killed him. The assumption is Mr. Porter was either in on the racket and was a threat to Henderson, or he suspected something and wished to verify his suspicions before going to the police. But that is guessing—and I never like to guess. Good day, gentlemen. Come on, George." He led me away.

It was the first time in our long acquaintance, friendship I would like to think of it if Ernie ever gave his friendship to anyone, that he had ever called me "George" and I rather liked it. Yes, I liked it a lot.

That evening Blair Henderson was arrested at his Palm Springs estate. He listened attentively to what the authorities had to say, for he was a prominent and a wealthy man. But the description of how he committed the murder and his actions during the brutal killing broke him entirely. He went to his room to pack a bag—and took poison. Then he smoked one of his

dollar cigars and before he died, calmly confessed to the murder, pointing out quite clearly that Emile Porter was an honest but a foolish man.

I'll admit I gloated quite unashamedly to Marvin Hines when he returned from his trip east. He sat there looking at me with that unbelieving grin that I slowly but surely wiped from his face. Once he interrupted with "impossible and preposterous" and then after enumerating each clue and the conclusion Ernie drew from it, I leaned back and said:

"Did Ernie get that out of my subconscious mind—out of the kindness of my heart. I was the only one who believed in Ernie—and now I've been vindicated."

"But," Marvin objected, "Ernie might have reached any one of a hundred conclusions from those clues while the ones he did reach—"

"Led directly to the murderer and a confession." I laid it on thick. "Come now, Marvin; what do you say to that?"

"I can't believe it," he said and then lost five games of chess right in a row.

IT WAS two weeks before I saw Marvin again. In the meantime I had entertained the mayor, half the common council, the other two members of the library board and, yes, Chief Hanover himself. They wanted to do something in the way of honoring Ernie. Money, a cup—a testimonial—but Ernie would have none of it. They wanted me to talk to Ernie. They were calling on him again Saturday night at eight o'clock to make a last plea. I didn't promise. I was glad I didn't. For the next time I had a talk with Ernie, he said:

"It's over with and forgotten. I'm going to read mystery stories again and not try to solve them," and after a pause: "What I did, I did for you—at least I did it that way for you, George. Let us forget it. Like a dream. A good dream when I think of you—a bad dream when I think of myself."

Marvin Hines came down that Saturday evening early, and we had dinner in the Desert Cafe, on Palm Dale Road. Marvin was very somber and listened to me tell about the officials calling on Ernie that night

without changing expression or interrupting me. When dinner was over and I was about to rise, he leaned over and took my arm.

"Sit down, George," he said. "When I retired from the detective business, I never wanted to hear of crime again. But I've taken a bus man's holiday these last two weeks and have been debating with myself if I should tell you or not. We all have our pride. You and Ernie—and I, but it isn't pride that makes me speak now." Suddenly he leaned forward and whispering the words in a low husky voice, though no one was near our booth: "You've been fooled, George—taken in. So has the police chief and the mayor and the whole town. That's right, George. Ernie deceived you all."

"You mean Blair Henderson didn't kill Porter. But he confessed! He—"

"No, no, I don't mean that. Take it easy now. You're not going to like it. I mean, first, that Ernie never solved those crimes in books for you. He knew the answers because he looked in the back of the books before you ever read them."

"But he couldn't. I got the books from the library before anyone else had them."

He shook his head, said:

"Do you remember telling me that Ernie made keys; often secretly, for people who shouldn't have lost them? Did he ever tell you he made one for the librarian, Miss Anna May Cotes?" (It was the first time I had ever heard Miss Anna May's last name.) "Of course he didn't, and neither did she. But she told me—though she doesn't know she did. Ernie made an extra key for himself and, late at night, he'd slip into the library and into the room behind the desk and look in the back of the mystery books on which the varnish was drying. It was as simple as that. I guess then he just wanted to be important to you?"

"No, no, I can't believe it!" I protested. But when I looked at Marvin I did believe it, and even then not wanting to believe it, I said: "But the murder of Porter—the real murder? How could Ernie know about that? He couldn't look in the back of the book. He couldn't find that in the room behind the desk in the library."

"But he did," Marvin nodded. "For he

was in that room when the murder took place. He saw it through a knot hole. I know for I looked through that hole myself the other day. Ernie lived here in the desert for over forty years and must have known Blair Henderson well—so his description of him; his wooden leg, absence of teeth, size and build. The killing, of course, was all too sudden for Ernie to prevent it. But he saw it just as he described it—though I think he planted the button under the loose board and the ashes on the book shelf himself. I do know, though, that he went to Palm Springs that morning before the body was discovered and to the tobacco shop and found out about the high-priced cigars Blair Henderson had made to order for him. But if Porter tore that button off Henderson's coat—or, if Ernie tore it off while the coat was in Henderson's parked car some place in Palm Springs after the killing, I don't know. That must come from Ernie himself. I am only an ordinary working detective, with no books to look in the back of."

"We'll find out!" I came to my feet. My hands were shaking. "We'll go and ask Ernie—now."

"Now? While those others—the officials—are there?" Marvin looked at his watch.

"Yes, while they are there. I—I think that is right, Marvin."

"Maybe," said Marvin. "But if that's the way you want it, it's right."

INDIGNATION — bewilderment — had overcome me, but mostly it was a hurt, a lump, a moving, rolling ball down in the bottom of my stomach.

We came upon Ernie's little shack with the shop in front through the alley, back of Railroad Avenue. The window on the side was open and the curtains parted, and there was a light over Ernie's work bench. Ernie was talking to a small group of men who stood there. They were the same ones who had come to see me. Marvin and I hesitated, stopped, and pulled up close to the window. Ernie was saying:

"—I didn't mind you all saying I couldn't use my head. And I used it, not because you laughed at me, but because you laughed at Mr. Norton for believing in me. Mr.

Norton visited me first because I was a lonely old man. Then he liked me. Then he believed in me—and if he hadn't believed in me, Emile Porter would be dead and buried and his murderer a free man—free to kill again. So, you go and honor Mr. Norton. I've got all the honor I'll ever want or need." His head came up sharply, and his chin shot out. "It's George Norton's belief in me." Ernie walked to the door at the back of the shop. "Good night, gentlemen," he said. "I never want to hear a word about it again."

The door closed almost gently and Ernie disappeared behind it.

The men stood silently looking at each other, shaking their heads. There was no laughter. Ernie was an important man now.

I was walking away, up the lane by the library and across the street to my own house where the light shone on the porch, a little blurred it seemed, though it may have been my vision. I felt Marvin's hand on my arm. "I guess," I said, "Ernie did it for me—because of me."

"Yes, I guess he did," Marvin said.

"He's not a bad old man. Rather a—rather a—"

"Rather a fine old man, George. Yes, he is."

"Perhaps he's right. I mean about never hearing of it—again."

"Yes, if that's how you want it, George, it's right. He . . . Hello, what's this?"

I picked up the box before the door and carried it inside with me. I hardly knew I was opening it as I placed it on the table. Then I saw the men. The chess men—the polished wood, the finely carved pieces that must have taken days, even months, of work and—and—there was the card. It read simply:

To my friend, George.
Ernie.

That night it was my turn to lose five straight games to Marvin. But my thoughts were not unpleasant. I'm not a young man. I've lived a long time. Two friends—two real friends! That's a lot even in a long life. A whole lot.



The guard found the gun

CODE OF THE LAWLESS

ON HIS way to the upper cot to get some sleep, Gordon Hunter was stopped short. His eyes fastened on a small, hard shape under the mattress of his cellmate.

Hunter lifted one end of the mattress noisily. He had guessed that his cellmate

By MORRIS HERSHMAN

*In stir, the wages of snitching
is death—and there's no appeal*

might've smuggled in some candy. The two men didn't like each other, but six, two and even, Hunter would get some. The prisoner's code is often explicit about small things, too.

"Get away from there," said Matt Beck behind him.

Hunter got away. He'd never liked Matt Beck, but didn't shiver at sight of him unless with hidden hatred. Six feet three inches tall, with a face red as a traffic light, Beck was a good man to stay clear of all the time.

"Are you going to break out of here?" Gordon Hunter asked quietly.

Beck nodded, said, "It cost a fortune to smuggle in that gun through people who won't talk, and I couldn't find the right place for it so far. If this gets around—well, you know how they take care of stoolies in this place."

Hunter had heard, but didn't think about it. He knew he'd have to do something, and quick. Another man was involved, a good friend of Gordon Hunter's. An honest guy whose honesty might cost his life. This guy had been chief witness against Matt Beck when Beck went on trial for the armed robbery charge that sent him here.

And Beck wouldn't take it lying down. He kept saying, "Soon as I'm outta there I'm gonna kill that witness." It made no difference to Beck whether the police nailed him, he'd been so mad. And they'd never be able to do a thing until it was too late. You can't arrest a man because he talks about committing murder.

BUT maybe, somehow, he could be stopped. Hunter, himself in prison, had decided not to tell anyone at all how well he knew Beck's intended victim, and yet in some way he must balk the bearlike man. As Beck's cellmate he seemed to have a chance in two million. Now he knew different. He absolutely couldn't get at Matt Beck. On account of his being Beck's cellmate every other prisoner would know who must have talked. And he'd heard what happened to stool-pigeons. It looked hopeless on account of the prisoner's code.

All Hunter said was, "You haven't got a thing to worry about."

"I better not have," Beck answered.

Hunter approached another inmate, a doctor or "croaker" nicknamed Froggy. "I don't know nothin' about it," Froggy said emphatically, "and you better not be so wise, either, or Matt Beck'll break you in two."

Hunter nodded thoughtfully. And if Beck didn't "cool" him, he knew good and well that one of the other prisoners would.

But from then on, he formed a new habit. He went to the warden's office three times that week. Not in secret, though. He was very careful, in fact, to let himself be seen going in, to let himself be seen by Matt Beck.

It didn't surprise him that the big man should go up in the air about it. In their cell one night, Beck cornered him.

"What's with you and the warden, you going there so often?"

"Nothing," Hunter said, a little tighter inside now. "I've got complaints to make about the food and the working conditions."

"If you stool me and I don't bump you, somebody else will. And just in case you don't think I could do it—"

Hunter wasn't talking much next afternoon in the machine shop. He'd come in with a black eye. He did answer Froggy's question with one of his own.

"Who do you think gave it to me?" he asked dourly.

"Beck's had it in for you for a long time now, hasn't he?"

"Uh-huh." Hunter leaned forward. Listen, Froggy, I want to smuggle in a gun."

Hunter didn't have much more money in the world than the amount Froggy wanted for a gun. He couldn't help but agree to the price. In case he didn't, he knew what his good friend on the outside might run into first if Beck escaped.

And Beck might escape, anyway. Gordon Hunter didn't notice whether or not his fingers were crossed for good luck.

That afternoon he took pencil and paper and wrote a letter. Not in his usual swift, smooth-flowing hand, though. This very special letter he wrote in block capitals. Once finished, he got rid of the pencil. He dropped the letter off near the signal tower. It'd be picked up, he was sure, by a guard he knew

to be honest.

He had the gun in his hands before that day's work was over. In his cell that night he asked Matt Beck, "I suppose you're going to live high, wide and handsome once you break out."

"I've got one old score to settle, a guy I have to get even with, and then—" Beck frowned. "Don't ask too many questions. The last blabbermouth stoolie around here got himself a broken neck. So did the one next to last."

"I wouldn't talk. I can't afford to."

"Guess not . . . what's that noise?" Beck stood anxiously at the extreme right of the cell, gripping bars and looking out. "There's a lot of guards and somebody in front of 'em. Now, where do you suppose they're headin' for?"

Both men found out in a moment. The guards and the man in front, the warden, brought the rhythmic swelling sound to a halt.

One of the guards took out a ring of keys. It was their cell door he opened.

Beck turned venomously to Hunter. "Didn't believe me, huh? I kept telling you what happens around here to stoolies and you'll find out . . . What's wrong, warden?"

THREE of the guards had walked into the tiny cell and the warden, standing outside, looked grim. "You've got nothing to complain about," he said, mildly enough. "But I had a note just now that there's a gun hidden here. The men are going to make a search."

A dazed look had crossed Beck's face. Obviously, he just couldn't dope out this note business at all. The gun he'd smuggled in a few days ago had been removed and taken somewhere else. If Hunter had a brain in his head, he certainly must have realized that, too.

The guards knew exactly what they were doing. The lower cot, Beck's, was entirely ignored. With swift economical motions, one man hoisted himself up to a position where he could move the mattress around on the upper

The guard grunted confidently. When he lowered himself to the floor with a catlike jump, a gun lay in his hands.

The warden, only glancing at the gun to make sure what it was, tapped his lower teeth with a thumbnail. "You know what this means, Hunter," his voice had an edge of finality. "There's only one way we deal with this kind of thing. You're getting ten days in solitary."

Being led away, Hunter passed the cells in his "block," and looked into them. He saw how the men sympathized. Especially did he see the coldly calculating looks that Froggy cast back into the cell Hunter and Beck had been using.

The story of the note, he knew, with an inmate's sense of the way prison news spreads almost as fast as it happens, was even then going the rounds.

Hunter had other thoughts to keep his mind working those ten days. The men knew that Hunter and Beck hated each other's guts. Hunter had done plenty to make that true.

Hunter hoped it had all been worth his while, to say nothing of his buying a gun, putting it under his own mattress and then writing to tell the warden where it could be found. Either it had been worth while, or Matt Beck's escape had resulted in Hunter's good friend being shot and killed for doing what any guy like that is supposed to.

This much he was sure of, he'd find out in ten days. When they were up he wasn't returned to his own cell. The guards simply put him in with Froggy. They didn't volunteer the reason, but Froggy did.

"We didn't like your getting ten days in solitary on account of a stinking note," Froggy sympathized, his face hard. "None of us liked it."

"Thanks," Hunter said. "Matt Beck around?"

Froggy shook his head slowly, as if being mournful.

"Rotten thing happened to poor old Beck. A day after you went into solitary, poor old Beck passed away."

"He died? He just simply died, and that's all?"

"He was killed by a fatal disease," Froggy said significantly.

"Disease?"

Froggy nodded, his face hard. "Stool-pigeonitis," he said.

AS CRIME GOES BY

If I was startled, Sheila
was downright petrified



*She was too beautiful to die . . .
too rich to be allowed to live*

A Complete Novelet by ROY LOPEZ

CHAPTER I

DEAD MEN DON'T TALK

WE WERE in Ma McCarver's Gift Shop at the hotel, talking about the fog bell, when the blonde showed up.

"It was off of an old sailing ship named the *Mary Ellen*," Ma McCarver was saying. "I've had it in the shop here now for six years or so. Funny none of the tourists have ever picked it up."

"She's trying to make a sale to you, Scotty," Gabe McCarver said. Gabe was a good sort. He ran the hotel here at Shipwreck Point, and he was also the town postmaster. It was a two-bit sort of a place, a summer resort halfway down the Atlantic Coast. Or maybe I'm stretching things to call a town as small as that a resort. The hotel, a few cottages, some houses strung out along the highway, and that's about all. It was just my size for a vacation, just my speed.

The weather had been swell so far, but tonight a summer storm was whipping in from the ocean and beating time against the

old hotel. I had drifted into Ma's gift shop and we were talking about that fog bell, the way I said, when the blonde came in and crossed to the desk. I could see it all from the shop.

Ma and Gabe could see her too. They looked, and froze solid. Their son, Jim, was on duty at the desk. I couldn't be sure from that distance, but I sort of got the idea Jim wasn't too tickled to see this babe either.

Ma and Gabe snapped out of their trance and drifted over. I tagged along. Being a private eye teaches you never to keep your nose out of other people's business. Besides, I had never been allergic to willowy females.

When we came into focus Jim was saying, "I'm sorry, but I can't leave the hotel when I'm on duty. You know that."

"But Jimmy, wouldn't you do a favor even for me?" It was one of those deep, sugar-coated voices with barbed wire and arsenic buried under the sugar.



A Hundred Grand Can Cause Murder, and

"Sorry," Jim said. He was staring right at the blonde, and his eyes were hard as flint.

"But Jimmy, I'm afraid to go out there alone on a night like this. Luke Adlis was supposed to go with me, but he's not at his office, and I just feel awfully helpless."

She looked helpless. Like a panther in a cage full of rabbits. Gabe McCarver said, "Can I help you, Miss Burton?"

The blonde smiled at him, ignoring the ice in his manner. "Why, hello, Mr. McCarver. So nice to see you again. I thought I'd just come down and surprise you."

"Luke told us you were coming. What can we do for you?"

There was a lot more going on here than I could grab. The blonde was twisting a knife in somebody's guts, and getting a great kick out of it. Just whose guts I couldn't tell yet.

"I've rented the old house out at the Point again this year," she purred. "Luke Adlis told me last season that I could have it again this summer if I wanted it. He promised to meet me tonight and take me out there, but I can't find him. I was sort of hoping Jimmy could go with me."

The sentence trailed off on the floor, but the McCarvers left it there. Gabe said, "Jim's on duty. He can't get away."

"But there must be somebody. Just to go out there with me and help me open the house, and be sure everything is all right. That's all I want."

Gabe shrugged and glanced at me. I liked the setup, and Gabe had thrown me the ball.

"Would I do?" I said. "I'm here on vacation, but I'm a private detective. This sort of thing is pretty much up my alley."

"Why, how nice!" the blonde cooed. "That's so sweet of you—"

"Don't get any wrong ideas," I said. "My sweetness is based on a love of twenty-five bucks. In advance."

I don't make a habit of talking to clients that way, but this dame was the type that has to be handled. Besides, I was safe anyway. She needed an arm, and I was the only

male in the place, outside of Jim McCarver, with more than half of his teeth left.

"You put it so quaintly," the blonde said, glaring back at me. She reached into her handbag, pulled out two tens and a five and tossed them on the counter. "There. Or would you rather have it in a box of gardenias?"

I grinned and pocketed the dough. "Have you got a car?"

"Yes."

"Take it, and I'll follow you in mine. Then you won't have to drive me back."

"That's good of you. Do you have a name?"

"Scotty Graeme," I said. "Let's shove off. This storm could get worse."

I'M SUPPOSED to be able to handle a heap fairly well, but I had my work cut out for me keeping up with Sheila Burton. She whipped along the narrow curving road like a souped-up phantom, and I had plenty of trouble keeping her tail light in sight through the sheets of rain. It was the only road out to the Point, and luckily I had already driven it a few times. Otherwise I could have taken one of those hairpin turns and found myself in ten feet of Atlantic Ocean.

Sheila's tail light loomed up in my face and my brakes yelled. I got out and Sheila was waiting.

"This is it," she shouted over the storm.

"Anybody there?"

"No. But Adlis sent me the key."

We plowed up the hill and the house shaped up through the storm. We climbed on to the front porch and Sheila fumbled in her handbag. I tried the door.

It was unlocked. I looked at Sheila. She said, "I'll be darned," and dropped the key back into her bag. We went inside and I turned on some lights.

It was an old house, and apparently it hadn't been used since the preceding summer. Sheila said something about getting a cleaning woman in to help her straighten up. I wrestled with shutters and got some of

Murder, Like Dividends, Can Multiply!

them open. Sheila followed me as I went through the house, turning on lights and doing a superficial job of brushing cobwebs out of the way.

I grabbed Sheila's bags and said, "Where do these go?"

"I'll be using the front bedroom," she said. "Leave the little one on the bed, and I guess you can put the large one in the closet."

I followed half of those instructions. I put the small bag on the bed, but I did not put the larger one in the closet. I opened the



SCOTTY GRAEME

closet door, but from then on my plans changed in a hell of a hurry.

The door opened faster than it was supposed to. I jumped a mile as something fell past me, banged on to the floor and lay still. Sheila Burton let out a scream.

And brother, I couldn't blame her. There, at our feet, was a dead man.

Anybody who tells you how calm he would be at a time like that is a liar. I've been around, see, and I've had my fill of stiffs, but if you think this business didn't rock me back on my heels you're nuts. I just stood there, staring at the corpse, trying to make

my brain start functioning and having no luck at all.

The thing that snapped me out of it was the look on Sheila's face. If I was startled, Sheila was downright petrified.

"Take it easy," I said. "Hang on to yourself."

Her mouth opened and closed. "He . . . He . . ."

"He's dead," I said. "Do you know who he is?"

She looked at me sharply. "No," she cried, her voice three octaves higher than normal. "No, I don't know who he is. Why should I? Why should I know who he is?"

I grabbed her and shook her hard. "Cut it," I said. "No reason to blow your top. If you don't know, you don't know."

I knelt down and had a look. The man was somewhere in his early thirties, and he hadn't shaved for three or four days. He was wearing a torn shirt open at the collar, and faded gray pants that looked more like city than seacoast. He hadn't been dead long, maybe just a few minutes or an hour. I couldn't be sure.

He had been shot. Right through the heart, and from fairly close. Nice, clean job.

"Hobo maybe," I said. "Not that my guess is any good. We'll let the cops worry about that."

"The police!" It was sort of a strangled gasp. "Do they—I mean, isn't there some way—"

"Are you kidding?" I snapped. "You bet your life they'll know, and in a hurry. Have you got a phone here?"

"No. It's one reason I liked the place." She was into a routine of opening and closing her hands. She was still staring at that body.

"I'll get into town and report it," I said. "But first let's you and I understand each other. I'm not going to obstruct justice, but I'm on your side and I'll help if I can. Are you still sure you don't recognize this bird?"

"I told you—"

"Okay, you told me. I think you're lying, but play it any way you want." She didn't answer. I said, "This may be a bit unpleas-

ant for you before it's through. Is there anybody you want told that you're here? Any relative that you'd like to come and stay with you till this business is straightened out?"

"Relative? Definitely not."

"I just thought it might make it a little easier for you—"

She cut me off short. "Look here, Graeme, I came down here for one purpose and one purpose only. That was to be alone. If I had wanted anybody to know where I was, do you think I—"

Nothing else came out. "Do I think what, Miss Burton?"

"Skip it," she said, biting her lip. "Go call your police, or whatever you're going to do."

"Better come with me," I said. "Amateurs have a way of messing up evidence when they're left alone with corpses."

SHE DIDN'T buck it. Thirty minutes later we were back with the local cop. But I was waiting for the County detectives, and they showed up darned fast. A captain named McAleer was in charge. He was young but he looked like a smart boy.

I told him the story, right down the line. The only thing I kept to myself was my own opinion that Sheila Burton recognized the corpse, and that was just a theory anyway. McAleer was a good kid, and didn't foam at the mouth when he heard I was a private.

"I'll be glad to have your cooperation on this," he said, and grinned. "Anybody who can make my job easier is a friend of mine. And I'm pretty sure you'll keep your nose clean."

"I have so far, haven't I? I said.

McAleer nodded. "Let's see what the boys have found out about our defunct pal."

They hadn't found out much. According to a couple of things in his wallet, his name was Dirk Martell, and he was from Cleveland. The local cop confirmed that he wasn't from Shipwreck Point, and he was pretty sure the guy had never been around before. That, plus the beat-up clothes he was wearing, made the tramp theory sound pretty good—except for Sheila's reaction when she first spotted the guy. Furthermore, even

granting he was a tramp, who had killed him, and why?

Mac asked Sheila if she recognized the stiff, but by now Sheila had her guard up. When she said no, Mac believed her.

"I see no reason for holding you, Miss Burton," he said. "But I've got to ask you not to leave Shipwreck Point for a few days."

"That's ridiculous," Sheila protested. "Why on earth—"

"Because a man has been killed," Mac said, and he was hard as flint now. "Don't get horsey, Miss Burton. I could slap you in jail if I felt like it."

"But I never saw this man in my life!"

"I'm willing to believe that, for the time being. It's why I'm not locking you up. But I still don't want you leaving the Point. You can go in as far as the hotel, but that's all. If you don't feel like cooperating to that extent—"

"There doesn't seem to be much choice," Sheila cut in.

"No choice whatever," Mac said. "Now tell me something. You rented this same house last summer?"

"That's right."

"Who from?"

"A local character named Luke Adlis."

"He owns the place?"

The town cop answered that one for her. "He's just a real-estate agent, Captain. Folks who own this house live in California. Luke rents it out for them every summer, and that's all they care about. They ain't been back here in ten, fifteen years."

"That should be easy enough to check," Mac said. "Who else has a key here, Miss Burton?"

"Adlis has. That's all I know."

"When did you get yours?"

"He mailed it to me a week ago. I asked him to. He was supposed to meet me tonight, but I didn't want to take any chances of being locked out if I missed him."

That seemed to be all Mac wanted. His boys meanwhile had searched every foot of the house and grounds, looking for the murder weapon or anything else that might tie in. They drew a blank.

"I'll check with Cleveland and see if they've got anything on this bird," Mac told

me. He frowned. "Strange setup, Scotty."

"Most murders are," I said.

I went back to headquarters with him and listened while he phoned Luke Adlis, the real estate agent. I could get most of it from Mac's end, and he supplied the rest when he finished. Adlis had driven in to the nearest railroad stop to wait for a client. The client hadn't showed up. He had gotten back to the hotel and asked for Sheila, but she and I were already on our way to find a body.

"That front door being unlocked is an interesting angle too," Mac said. "Adlis says that as far as he knows there are three keys to the place. He has one himself, he sent one to Sheila, and the third has apparently been lost."

"Had Adlis been out there recently?"

"He says not. According to him, the Burton girl said she didn't mind the house not being cleaned up when she got there. So he just let it go."

There was nothing else for me, so I left.

CHAPTER II

HELL HATH NO FURY



I PUT a night's sleep behind me and worked my way through four fried eggs and some bacon the next morning. The news of the killing was all over the hotel by then. I saw the McCarver family in the dining-

room doing a lot of heavy conferring.

After breakfast I cornered Jim McCarver and asked him what he knew about Luke Adlis, the real-estate agent who had rented the house to Sheila. Jim gave me that level stare of his which could have meant anything or nothing.

"Luke's all right, I guess," he drawled. "I don't think much of his taste in women, but he's all right."

"What do you mean, his taste in women? Is he married?"

"Luke's not the marrying kind, mister. He buys 'em in carload lots. Likes to count

his girl friends on the fingers of both hands. And some of those fingers are gold-tipped."

"I don't get you," I said, to draw the kid out.

"Money, mister, money. The kind Luke goes in for cost lots of money. Some men put their savings into yachts. Luke puts his into flashy dames." He shrugged. "It's good sport if you like it, I guess. Me, I never quite looked at it that way. I figure if you like some girl enough, you want to marry her . . ."

He left it hanging there. I drifted over to Luke Adlis's office. He was a middle-aged man with a streak of gray a half-inch wide running through his dark brown hair.

"I know who you are, Graeme," he said with a smile that was friendly enough. "Gabe McCarver told me the Burton girl had gone out with you last night. Sorry I missed her." He grinned ruefully. "On second thought, maybe I'm not sorry."

"Don't be," I said. "It was no fun having that stiff drop out of thin air."

He invited me into his private office, and I saw in a hurry what Jim McCarver had meant. The outer office was obviously where Adlis did business. But his inner sanctum looked like a college boy's scrapbook. There were pictures of females all over the walls, females of every size and description. Most of the photos were autographed to Luke, and some of the autographs must have sizzled as the ink hit the paper. It was strange finding a wolf in a little town like this, working at real estate. But he probably made pretty fair dough at it, and dough was what these lassies on the wall obviously took plenty of.

"Did you ever hear of the dead guy before?" I asked him when I could tear my eyes away from his art gallery.

"No," Adlis said. "The detective asked me last night. What was that name again?"

"Martell. Dirk Martell."

Adlis shook his head. "I'd swear he's never been to Shipwreck Point before. I'm a native here. All year round. I'd know."

"Ever hear Miss Burton mention anybody of that name?"

"Nope." He paused long enough to offer me a smoke and light one for himself. "Maybe you haven't caught the setup with Burton

yet. She comes down here strictly for solitude. When she rented that place last summer, all of her questions were about how isolated she would be. She liked the idea of being a mile beyond the nearest house. She liked being on the very point of land, the farthest place out. She even seemed interested in knowing that there was only one road back into town here, only one road through the town. How do you figure all that, Graeme?"

"I can't," I said. "And there are plenty of other things I can't dope either. One in particular."

I told Adlis about the little drama between Sheila and the McCarver family the night before. But Adlis stopped me in the middle.

"There I can help you," he said. "So could anybody else in town. You see, Sheila never ran around with anybody at all last summer—except one guy. That was Jim McCarver. Everybody knew she was just having herself a little fun to keep from getting bored, but Jim's a square kid. He doesn't figure in those terms. He fell for Sheila like a boulder going off the edge of a cliff. When Sheila had him down, and decided he'd passed his usefulness at keeping her amused . . ." Adlis shrugged.

"The old heave-ho, eh?"

"Right. With a couple of kicks in the teeth thrown in for good measure."

Well, I was that much ahead of the game anyway. At least I knew now what was behind the triple freeze the McCarver family had tossed Sheila the night before.

I thanked Adlis and went outside, pausing for a minute on the sandy walk leading to his office. The sun was out full again, and there wasn't even a wad of cloud left in the sky as a reminder of last night's storm. Fine day for a swim, I decided. Perfect day. Why should I get mixed up in a murder that was none of my business? I was on vacation.

I DRANK in a couple of lungfuls of salt air, grinned back at some gulls overhead that were giving me their own particular brand of Bronx, and got in my heap. I pulled away and headed back toward the hotel.

Something hard jabbed into my backbone. A feminine voice, sharper than nitric acid,

hissed into my ear.

"All right, Graeme, let's travel."

I glanced up into the mirror and got a sharper jab from the rear. "Move!" the girl snapped, and I moved. We zipped out of town and purred along at forty-five.

"Slow down," the girl said. She got up off the floor and climbed over into the front seat, making darned sure to keep me covered. I was doing no arguing.

"Is there any way you can pull off of this road, so we can talk?" the girl said. She was another stranger. The joint was lousy with strangers these days.

"I'll see what I can do," I said, and wrenched hard on the wheel. The car lurched, and I moved with it. We careened off into the smooth sand and I had the girl's gun before she caught her balance.

"You dirty—" the girl began, and worked up from there. I slipped the gun into my pocket and kept going across the sand until we were down near the edge of the water. There was a picnic group a half mile or so up the beach. Otherwise we were alone. I cut the motor.

"What shall we talk about?" I said.

The answer seemed to be my immediate ancestry. I waited, studying my little friend while she got the fumes out of her system. She was tiny, somewhere just over five feet, and she had a thin face and eyes like highly polished onyx.

The profanity went on and then all of a sudden the girl was through. She stopped swearing and slumped. She seemed to take on ten years in three seconds.

"That's better," I said. "Now let's hear what you've got to say. How did you know my name?"

"It's all over town," she said listlessly. "You were with the Burton girl when they found him."

"Found who?"

"Dirk."

That was what I wanted, to hear her call him by his first name. "You knew Dirk?" I said.

The girl looked up at me. "She killed him, Graeme. You know that, don't you? You're not fool enough to believe that story of hers?"

"We haven't got much of a story out of her yet," I said. "How do you know she killed him?"

"She must have. He followed her here, and she killed him."

She was looking straight ahead now, out of to the breakers that were lapping lazily at the quiet sand.

"Do you know her?" I asked.

"I know Dirk followed her here. That's enough."

"Why did he follow her here?"

She laughed, a sharp laugh that was about as funny as a smashed-up love affair. "Why does any man follow any girl anywhere?"

"You were his girl friend." It was a statement, not a question. This kid's heart wasn't on her sleeve—it was on a tray she was holding way out in front of her.

"Yeah." Her lip trembled. "Cheap, lazy lug. Yeah, I was his girl friend. I never had much sense anyway."

"How do you know he gave you the slide? Maybe there was some other reason he trailed Burton."

She wanted to believe that. Dead or not, she wanted to believe that Dirk Martell had had some other reason for chasing Sheila Burton here to Shipwreck Point. "He did hand me a story about getting some money out of her."

"How was he planning to do it?"

"He never talked much. I don't know. I—I was too jealous to believe him anyway."

Then the tears came. She twisted around and buried her face in the back of the seat and I waited some more. When she was cried out I started talking again.

"Maybe you've heard part of the story," I said, "but not all of it. I was with Burton when we got to that house. I was the one who found the body. She had no chance to see Dirk, talk to him, or anything else."

The onyx eyes blazed at me again. "Are you really that stupid, Graeme? Do you really believe that?"

"Go on," I said.

"Why, a blind man could see it. That phony story of hers about wanting somebody to go out there and open the house with her. She spends a whole summer there

alone, but all of a sudden she's scared. She wants a bodyguard."

I WAITED, and the rest of it came, just about the way I expected. "Can't you see it was all a frame? She had been to that house before she ever went near the hotel. She had killed Dirk. She probably didn't know how to get rid of his . . . his body. So she came into town, picked up a nice, dumb stooge like you, and took you back out there with her to serve as her alibi. God, Graeme, don't tell me you didn't even think of that?"

I had thought of it. I had been thinking of it ever since that Bette Davis entrance into the hotel lobby.

"Who are you?" I said.

She sagged again. "The name is Billie Mason. Don't bother to check on me. There's nothing to find. You won't get much on Dirk either. He was small-time."

"What was his line?"

"Anything that looked good. I've only known him a year, and he's been pretty flat most of that time." The voice woke up again, just a little. He used to run with the big boys. Did a couple of bank jobs a few years ago. You probably won't find out much about it now."

I started the car. She said, "Where are we going?"

"To see McAleer."

"He's the cop?"

"He's the cop."

She didn't answer. I said, "I'll give you a break. Tell Mac your story. Don't hold anything back, and I'll forget about you waving the artillery at me. Okay?"

That caught her. "Why the devil should you give me a break?"

"Don't ask me."

She didn't. I dropped her at Mac's office, told him who she was, and turned over her gun to him. I forgot to tell him she had threatened me with it. I was ninety per cent sure it wouldn't turn out to be the murder gun. Not that Billie Mason wasn't jealous enough, but the weapon that had put Dirk Martell to sleep had been a healthy piece of stuff. This thing of Billie's was a midget.

I went out to Sheila Burton's house. Mc-

Aleer had asked her the night before if she wanted to come back to the hotel, but she had turned the offer down. Apparently the idea of sleeping in a murder house didn't bother her as much as giving up her precious solitude.

She saw me coming and came down the walk to meet me. She had on a yellow slack suit this morning, and she hit me the same way as a dish of fresh peach ice cream on a hot afternoon. It was easy to tell how a kid like Jim McCarver could have tied himself into knots over a girl like this.

"Hello," she said. "I didn't know whether you'd be back."

"Just long enough to resign," I said.

"Resign? But I thought . . . that is, I was hoping you'd help me. I'm glad to pay for your services."

"I'm on vacation," I said. "There's nothing more I can do, anyway."

"I'm not so sure." She seemed worried. "After all, it was my house that poor man was found in." The "poor man" routine coming from her sounded about as genuine as a dime bottle of imported perfume.

"I don't see what you need me for," I said. "McAleer is plenty able to handle the detective work. If you're lonely and just want company, get somebody to come stay with you."

"There isn't anybody."

"There must be," I said bluntly. "Babes like you don't just float around the country renting a house this expensive for the entire summer, without there being some relative somewhere."

"I tell you there's nobody!" She darned near yelled it. Then she calmed down. "I—I'm sorry, Graeme, but I thought I made it clear to you that I came here specifically because I wanted to be alone."

I thought for a minute. "You still say you never saw Dirk Martell before last night?"

"Never." She was getting better every time she said it. This time I almost believed it myself.

"Ever hear of a girl named Billie Mason?"

"Mason." She shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. Why?"

"Skip it." I shrugged. "Okay, I'll stay on the case if you insist. Darned if I can

figure what you want with me."

"It's perfectly simple what I want with you," she said tartly. "Your friend McAleer is holding me on this strip of land as though I were the killer. He seems to trust you. If he's planning to pull a fast one, you'd be likely to know about it."

I grinned. "Pulling a fast one, I take it, means slapping you in the cooler with a murder charge against you?"

She began to fume, but I just laughed and walked away. I had met plenty of dames like that before, females who were used to waving a checkbook and seeing everybody fall over in a state of collapse. The only weird angle was finding the species in a sleepy little corner of the country like this.

CHAPTER III

FEMME FATALE



THAT WAS Tuesday. Wednesday drifted by with nothing much coming to the surface. I had another talk with Luke Adlis, but he was busy trying to peddle a couple of cottages that were still vacant, and he didn't have much to say. "I only saw the girl a half dozen times all last summer," he told me. "I don't know much more about her than you do. I don't know a thing about the man who was killed. Just a tramp, I'd guess."

I spent some time with McAleer. He had a report on Martell from Cleveland, but it didn't do much more than back up Billie Mason's story. "Penny-ante crook," Mac said. "Did two stretches a few years back, one for a bank job. That's about all."

"Did you hold Mason?" I asked him.

"No, but she promised to stick around." He smiled faintly. "We're watching to be sure she doesn't break that promise."

Thursday morning I woke up and lay there staring at the sunshine. I had just about decided to tell Sheila Burton to go peddle her papers and let me get some swimming in, when the phone rang.

It was McAleer. And he wasn't calling to

ask me if I had slept well.

"Be downstairs in five minutes," he clipped. "Make it three. I've got something to show you."

I dressed in a hurry. Mac's car was at the door of the hotel when I stepped outside, and I climbed aboard. It was still early. Nobody was functioning yet.

The local cop was with Mac. Neither of them did any talking as Mac jammed the car into gear and headed out the road toward the Point. I waited, knowing Mac would talk when he felt like it.

He didn't have to talk. I got the idea all by myself, the minute we reached Sheila Burton's house. The front door was open, and one of Mac's men was on the porch. He motioned us inside, and just four feet from the front door was what we had come to see.

Sheila was lying face down, and she was a mess. The bullet had hit something just right, and there was more bleeding than I had ever seen in my life. She had been shot, but if somebody had told me an axe did it, I'd have taken his word.

She was wearing some sort of a yellow crepe negligee. That is, some of it was still yellow. Apparently she had been in bed, somebody had banged on the door, she had thrown the negligee around her and come to answer. She shouldn't have bothered.

I felt as though I were back at the hotel, still asleep, still watching a lot of disjointed things go through my head with none of them making any sense. I saw the fog bell from the *Mary Ellen* sitting on one of the living-room tables. Ma McCarver had been trying to peddle it for six years, and suddenly it shows up in Sheila Burton's house. There were a pair of beach sandals right out in the middle of the floor. There was a tiny gray kitten rubbing happily against Mac's pants leg.

And Mac was looking at me.

That was when I began to wake up. I saw now why I had been brought here. It wasn't just because Mac wanted my gigantic brain power to help him do his job. Not by a darned sight.

I was here because I was suspect.

Mac didn't say a word, but I knew what was on his mind. Sheila Burton had been

my client. Now she was dead. Billie Mason had showed up in town, and I was the guy she had come to, not the cops. I was the kid who had found Dirk Martell's body, with Sheila as my only witness.

I didn't bother to tell Mac that I had taken a long walk alone on the beach the night before, so that I didn't have even a prayer of an alibi for a nice long stretch of time when this little job was probably being pulled off. He'd find out soon enough, anyway.

I was in fine shape.

"Know anything about it, Scotty?" Mac said at last.

"No," I said.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Tuesday. Two days ago."

"I thought you were still working for her."

"That was the general idea." I threw the ball back to him. "How did you get wind of this?"

"I've had a tail on her ever since the two of you found Martell's body," Mac said. "Just a daytime tail, not twenty-four hours. I wasn't looking for anything quite like this. You weren't either, were you, Scotty?"

My shirt felt like damp moss. "I told you I'd keep my nose clean," I said. "I've done it."

I COULDN'T tell whether he bought that or not. He kept going. "Evans showed up at seven this morning and the door was open—open and swinging, banging loud enough to wake up anybody. Anybody, that is, who's alive enough to be waked up. Evans wandered over to have a look-see. This is what he found. The Doc says it happened last night, around eleven or twelve."

I talked because I had to talk. "I haven't been working too hard on this case," I said. "I couldn't see what I was being hired for. I don't think Sheila really knew herself. She just felt something closing in on her, I suppose, and didn't know quite how to handle it. But she still wouldn't let me get close enough to do any good."

"What does that mean?"

I told him I thought she had recognized Dirk Martell, but she wouldn't admit it or give me any lead. Mac's eyebrows went up, and I reminded him fast that that was merely

a hunch of mine, and it might not mean a thing.

Mac wasn't too happy. I half expected him to tuck me away for a while, but he didn't. That helped some. I was in the dog house, way back in a dark corner of it, but at least I wasn't chained. I could move around. And brother, that's what I had to start doing—fast.

We headed back toward town. Mac said, "It might be interesting to have a talk with Billie Mason."

"You've got a point there," I said, glad to have him thinking of somebody else except one Scotty Graeme.

"She was jealous enough of this babe to blow her head off with all ease," Mac said. "And she could have blasted Dirk Martell for the same reason."

"That figures," I agreed. But I didn't stop thinking. There were a lot of other angles, and I rolled them around in my alleged brain while we sped back toward town.

Billie Mason was the only person I could tie to the Dirk Martell killing. So far, she seemed the only suspect with even a prayer of a motive. But the same didn't hold for Sheila. That dame had enemies by the gross. The whole McCarver family, for example. Jim hated her guts for the pushing around she had given him the summer before. Gabe and Ma McCarver hated her for the same reason. Billie Mason could have boiled her in oil. And maybe there were other people and other hates that we hadn't found out yet. Sheila had been that type.

It was half past eight when we got back to town. Mac glided up to the little building that serves as headquarters, and there was a man I had never seen before standing in the doorway. He was young and he had the pink-cheeked look of a college boy. I tabbed him as about twenty-two.

"Captain McAleer?" he said, looking at me. I pointed to Mac and the kid said, "I've got to talk to you, sir. My name is Paul Vanderveer."

The name registered somewhere, but I wasn't sure just where. I hadn't seen him at the hotel. *Another* stranger!

But as soon as we went into Mac's office, I got my answer. We sat down and Mac

said, "What's on your mind?"

"I just got here," the boy said. "Drove down overnight. I came because my sister sent for me. She said she was in some sort of trouble, and mentioned that the police were involved. I figured it might be better to have a talk with you before I go out to see her."

"Your sister?" Mac frowned. "She's staying here at Shipwreck Point?"

"Yes. You wouldn't spot her by name, though. She's using the name of Sheila Burton."

Mac and I looked at each other. It clicked then. "Your sister is Sheila Vanderveer?" I asked.

"That's right. She's rented a house here. Out on a point of land, somewhere."

I remembered now. This kid had been copy for most of the niterly columnists in New York. He belonged to the horsey set out at Bayview, Long Island. I had seen him a few times myself back in the city, usually when he was tanked up and trying to impress people. His old man had died a few years back before his two children—Paul and Sheila—had gone completely through what was left of the family fortune. There was supposed to be bad feeling between the old man and the son. At least that was the way I remembered it.

"You say you drove down from Bayview last night?" Mac asked.

"That's right, sir."

"How long a drive is it?"

"About eight hours." He seemed puzzled, but Mac kept going. "Anybody with you last night who could say when you left home?"

"What in the world—"

"Just routine, Vanderveer. Was there?"

"Well, sure. Matter of fact, I was throwing a little party. It broke up around midnight, and I started for here."

MAC MENTIONED the date of Dirk Martell's murder and asked the kid if he could prove his whereabouts then. Apparently he could. Mac took it all down and Paul said, "Look, I've got a right to know what this is all about. What sort of a jam is Sheila in?"

"I've got bad news for you," Mac said. "Get set."

He told Paul that Sheila was dead. I couldn't tell much from the boy's reaction. It could have been on the level or not.

"Murdered!" he burst out. "But who? Why?"

"We don't know," Mac said. "You got any ideas?"



AMATEUR SMUGGLERS

THE professional lawbreaker isn't the only person who likes to indulge in smuggling. Instead, contrabanders can be found in all walks of life—like the widow of a well-known New York doctor who was apprehended not so very long ago for trying to bring \$26,000 worth of undeclared French clothes and other fripperies into the United States.

Another lawbreaker was the wife of a New York State Supreme Court judge. She was booked on a very similar charge. The articles in question this time consisted of a small fortune in gems.

The most surprising offenders of all, however, are high-ranking officers of the United States army. Like the colonel booked on the West Coast after attempting to enter the country without declaring two diamonds—worth \$10,000.00—snugly concealed in his watch pocket.

Before the officials were finished with him, they discovered he'd brought in more than 500 diamonds, worth about \$200,000, on earlier trips. When he was questioned about this he said blandly and innocently, "Why those? They're souvenirs of war."

—Bess Ritter

Paul waved his hands helplessly. "Lord, how would I know? The letter she wrote asking me to come down here and help her is the first I've heard from her in months."

"Tell us about that letter," Mac said. "When did you get it?"

"Just yesterday. Sheila told me she was staying down here under the name of Burton,

so that nobody would bother her. She—" "Who would want to bother her?" I cut in.

"Don't ask me; I'm just telling you what was in that note."

"Did you think it was strange that she should write you that way after months of silence?"

"Not particularly. Sheila and I live our own lives, but we've always stuck pretty close when the chips were down." He shook his head, dazed. "She's dead!"

"Yeah," Mac said. "We'll want you to identify the body. There's one other question I'd like to ask you."

He pulled out a picture of Dirk Martell, lying on the floor of Sheila's bedroom and looking up with eyes that didn't see anything. Paul was staggered all over again.

"Holy Pete!" he choked. "Is he dead too?"

"That was the trouble your sister wrote you about," Mac said. "He was found in her place. You know him?"

"You bet I know him. His name is Martell." The kid looked at me. "You were asking me who would be bothering Sheila so that she would run off and hide under an assumed name. There's your answer."

"Why?" I said. "What's the tie-up?"

Paul Vanderveer leaned forward. "Dirk Martell used to be Sheila's husband."

I whistled. Paul came down with the rest of his delivery. "It was one of those skeletons in the family closet. Sheila met him one night when she was crooked to the gills. Married him. Woke up the next day and found herself the wife of a cheap hoodlum who had been smart enough to take one drink less than she had. The man even had a prison record. Sheila bought herself a divorce, but I've thought for a long time that Dirk was still blackmailing her. Maybe that's why she took the phony name and came down here last summer, and again this year. Maybe she wanted to get away from Dirk."

Mac rose. "That helps. Want to help us some more?"

"Any way I can, naturally."

"Then why don't you check in at the hotel and get yourself some breakfast." Mac looked at me. "Scotty will show you the way."

I appreciated that. Mac was still giving me some rope to hang myself with. But I wasn't fooled. I knew I was going to be watched just as closely as everybody else who had stumbled into this rat race.

CHAPTER IV

STRANGE STRANGER



I INTRODUCED Paul to Gabe McCarver and Gabe gave him a fishy stare and a room. Paul took a shower and he and I got some breakfast. A heavy fog was rolling in from the ocean, settling down over Shipwreck Point like a shroud. It was a good day for death. Sheila's ghost would have approved.

Paul didn't do much talking at breakfast. When we finished, he said, "You still know a lot more about all this than I do. Who owns the house Sheila rented?"

I explained about the owners living in California, and told him Luke Adlis had handled the deal. He asked me if it would be okay for him to talk to Luke. I guess he figured I was one of Mac's men, and I didn't bother to straighten him out. I said sure it was okay.

Luke was already at work when we arrived. I introduced Paul and Luke said, "I just heard. Sorry, son. Mighty sorry."

Paul said, "No use crying about it now. The thing is to find out who did it."

"Check," Luke said. That streak of gray in his hair made him look like a Senator. "What can I do to help?"

"You can bring me up to date on what Sheila was doing here," Paul said. "I never knew where she spent last summer, and I guess I wouldn't have known where she was this year if she hadn't written me."

Luke Adlis looked at me and shrugged. "There's not much I can tell you. As far as I knew, she was just a girl named Burton who wanted to rent a house. She paid on the nose and left the place in good condition. That was all I knew, and all I cared."

"Scotty was saying she kept pretty much

to herself last summer."

Luke nodded. "Nobody in town got to know her at all. Nobody that is, except Jim McCarver."

"Who's Jim McCarver?"

"The son of the hotel manager. Your sister was . . . well, rather rough on him." He gave Paul the story of how Jim had gone way up a tall tree over Sheila, only to have Sheila chop the tree out from under him, relishing each blow of the axe.

Paul didn't comment on that. He said, "Did you get any idea of why she wanted to keep her identity a secret?"

"You mean why the Burton name instead of Vanderveer?"

"Yes."

"I didn't even know it, till this morning. No, I can't guess. Reasons of her own, I suppose."

"Probably wanted to get away from Dirk," Paul said frowning. "But that still doesn't explain who killed her. Is there anything else you know that might help?"

Luke spread his hands. "Look, son, you still don't get the picture. None of us folks here in town knew your sister at all. Frankly, what little we did know of her, we didn't like. She'd come into the hotel now and then and buy expensive stuff to take back with her, but she just did it to lord it over the rest of us. Clothes, jewelry, even gadgets like a ship's bell that's been sitting in the hotel gift shop for years. She didn't have any use for that sort of thing. She just wanted to throw her money around."

"I think I understand," Paul said slowly. "I get the picture." His eyes hardened. "But it doesn't prove anything to know she was unpopular. What I'm interested in is the tieup with Jim McCarver. That might mean something. I think I'll talk with him."

"Better watch your step," I said. "The cops are interested in him too. Don't queer anything and get yourself in the soup."

"I'll be careful," Paul said, rising. "But you can't expect me to just stand around doing nothing."

Paul went back to the hotel and I dropped over to Mac's office. Mac gave me that same level stare and said, "Find out anything, Scotty?"

"You'll know if I do," I said. "Will it be okay with you if I see what Billie Mason has to say about all this?"

"Let's go," he said. "That's just where I was heading, myself."

Billie was staying in a little cottage near the beach. The fog was thicker now, and the clammy smell of low tide was as sharp as a new razor.

Mac's knock woke Billie up. She blinked at us and said, "Oh. You again." And finished fastening the wrapper she had pulled on.

Mac and I went in and Mac said, "Where were you around eleven last night, Billie?"

"Taking a walk," she said. "Why?"

More darned people taking walks last night while Sheila Vanderveer was getting herself blotted out. But I was in no position to gloat over that detail. One of those people walking themselves out of an alibi had been me.

"Alone, I suppose," Mac said.

"Sure."

Mac sighed. "Always alone. Sometimes it's harder to keep innocent people from sending themselves to the chair than it is to catch the guilty ones."

"I don't get you," Billie said.

"Not that I'm saying you're innocent," Mac went on. "Right now, I'd place my bet the other way."

"If you'd stop talking in riddles—"

"Were you jealous enough of Sheila Burton to kill her?"

EVERY emotion in the dictionary passed through Billie Mason's eyes. Fear, suspicion, hate, all of them.

"I don't know," she said.

"Did you kill her?"

Another long pause. Then: "Is she dead?"

"Yes."

Billie's lips curled. "That's swell. That's great. If that's what you wanted to hear me say, you've got it. I'm tickled pink she's dead."

"Why?"

The onyx eyes blazed. "Because she killed Dirk! Is that reason enough?"

"Plenty," Mac said. "It's also reason enough for you to have done the job yourself."

Billie didn't answer. Mac said, "Better come with us, angel puss. Get some clothes on."

"Am I under arrest?" Billie sneered.

"Just questioning." Again Mac sighed. "I sure wish somebody had been with you when you were taking that walk."

Mac dropped me off at the hotel. The fog was so thick now you could have spread it in a sandwich. It was a stale fog. It had been all used up before it ever got here.

I went into Ma McCarver's gift shop, just off the main lobby. Ma was just opening up. "Isn't it awful about the Burton girl," she said, but it didn't stick worth a darn. She was having a tough time keeping herself from hopping up on a table and dancing a jig.

"I was there," I said. "It wasn't pretty."

Ma just kept dusting. I said, "I see she bought the ship's bell off the *Mary Ellen*. How did you put that deal across?"

The old gal turned to me then, and the pretense was gone. "How did I put it across?" she blazed. "I didn't. Nobody ever put anything over on that girl."

"But if she bought it—"

"Trying to hold me up, that's all she was doing! She knew I wanted to leave with Gabe. We were driving over to my sister's for supper. So she stands here for half an hour, looking at everything in my shop and talking her fool head off. Finally she tells me to wrap up the bell and walks out with it, laughing at me. Threw her money on the counter and didn't even wait for the change!"

"And then you and Gabe drove out to your sister's place?"

"Certainly." She sniffed. "And Jim too. Got there late. Sarah had to heat the supper all over again."

"That was last night," I said.

"Of course it was last night."

"What time did you folks get back here?"

"I don't know. Midnight, I guess. What difference does it make?"

Maybe none, I told myself. Maybe none at all. Except that the three McCarvers were riding around the countryside about the time Sheila was being shot.

I wandered over to the desk. Gabe was

on duty. He and I had been pretty chummy before the fireworks started, but he had been giving me the cold eye ever since. Maybe he figured I was trying to aim Mac at his son.

"Mind if I ask you something?" I said.

"You're a guest here," Gabe drawled.

"You got a right to ask me a question."

"I'm not asking you as manager of the hotel. I'm asking you as the town postmaster."

His eyes flickered a little. "What about it?"

"You handle most of the mail yourself, don't you? I mean, you'd be likely to remember what letters have left town in the past few days?"

"Maybe."

"Did Sheila Burton send any mail out of here?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Don't question my word, young feller," Gabe barked. "When I say something, I mean it. There ain't been but three letters left this town all week, not counting mail from the hotel here. Blanche McCue wrote her sister in St. Louis, Luke Adlis wrote somebody in Long Island, and that Mason girl who just showed up sent a letter to Cleveland. That's all."

"Don't get sore," I said. "I'm just playing a theory. Sheila's brother says Sheila wrote to him asking him to come down here."

"If she did," Gabe snapped, "the letter didn't come through my office. Far as I know, she didn't write anybody anywhere." His voice was nearing the cracking point. "And furthermore, don't you come around here asking me any more fool questions. You ain't a policeman, Graeme, and from now on me and my family ain't talking to anybody but the police. Y'hear?"

I heard. I went outside and looked into the fog, trying to find an answer there. One was beginning to shape up.

I DRIFTED over to Mac's headquarters. Mac saw I had something on my mind and motioned me into his private office.

"That story Paul Vanderveer handed you about Sheila sending for him," I said.

"That's a lie."

"How do you know?"

"The letter didn't go through the local office here, according to Gabe. And you told Sheila not to leave town. Or did she leave town?"

"No," Mac said. "She did not. We weren't watching her all the time, but we darned well were watching this one road that leads out of here. We know everybody who's come and gone. Sheila hasn't been any further than the hotel since Dirk Martell's death."

He frowned. "I don't like that Vanderveer pup any better than you do, Scotty. But he didn't kill Sheila, or Dirk either. I've done some checking this morning, and everything he says tallies—except maybe the letter. He really is Paul Vanderveer, and that really was his sister. His alibis at the time of both killings are solid. We've got a motive on him, but that's all."

"What sort of a motive?"

Mac looked at me. "How would a hundred grand do as a starter?"

"Not bad," I said. "How does it go?"

"Old man Vanderveer hated Paul. Said he wasn't fit to handle big money. So when he died, he left a hundred thousand dollar annuity to Sheila, on the stipulation that on her death the balance would go to Paul. Sort of adding insult to injury—and giving the kid all the motive anybody could want."

"But his alibis hold water?"

"Tight as a drum."

I did some thinking. Mac held an unlighted cigaret in his mouth and did some of his own.

Finally I said, "Let's be honest. I know you've got your eye on me just as much as the rest of the animals in this menagerie. That's one reason I'd like to see the thing cleaned up. Another reason is that Sheila Burton was my client."

Mac didn't comment. I said, "Will you let me run the team for twenty minutes, and see if I can score?"

"What do you want?"

"I want everybody here. Everybody who's had even the slightest connection with the case. And a free hand—for twenty minutes."

"You think you've got something?"

"Judging by the way you've been glaring

at me this morning, I'd better have something."

Mac pressed his desk buzzer. "Tell the boys who you want," he said. "They'll have them here."

I told them I wanted the three McCarvers and Paul Vanderveer and Billie Mason. While they were being rounded up I went over to Luke Adlis's office and told him what was on the fire.

"I think you can help me," I said. "Can you give us a few minutes?"

"Glad to, Scotty," he said, mystified. "But I've told the police all I know. What am I supposed to do?"

"I'll give you the cue," I said, and he agreed.

Gabe and Ma McCarver were there when Luke and I arrived. They were sitting stiff and hostile against the left wall. Paul Vanderveer slouched easily in the one comfortable chair in the room. Billie Mason gave me a glare that would have melted an iceberg.

CHAPTER V

CONTACT MAN



JIM MCCARVER showed up a couple of minutes later on the arm of one of Mac's boys. "He was leaving town," the cop reported. Said he had to meet some people for the hotel over at the railroad."

"That right, Gabe?" Mac asked.

"Of course it's right!" Ma McCarver piped and Gabe nodded vigorously. Jim kept his mouth shut.

Mac nodded to me and I started talking. "There are a few things to be ironed out," I began. "Mac seemed to think it made sense if we got everybody together. Save time that way."

I looked around the room. "Two people have been killed here, Dirk Martell and the girl known as Sheila Burton. There's only one person in this room who would have had a motive for killing both of those people, so far as we know. That person is Billie Mason."

Billie's eyes were smouldering, but I ignored her and kept going. "Billie had motive, but I think she's told a straight story. There's one other person, however, who also had motive, and who hasn't told a straight story at all. That's Paul Vanderveer."

The smirk on Paul's face disappeared. "Are you kidding?" he said.

"Nope."

"What's wrong with my story?"

"Well, let's open it up and take a look at it. First of all, you say that Sheila wrote you to come down and help her. Maybe you don't know how mail service works in a little town like this. It's a small operation, and people remember what letters go out. Gabe McCarver is the postmaster here, and he says no letter from Sheila to anybody at all passed through the Shipwreck Point post office. Furthermore, Mac and his boys have been watching this road like hawks, and it's the only road out of town. Sheila hasn't traveled it since she got here. Any letter she mailed, Gabe would have known about."

Paul's face was white.

I said, "That isn't the only detail. I asked Sheila myself, on two separate occasions, if there was anybody she wanted to send for. She darned near bit my head off each time. Said she didn't want a soul to know where she was, especially no relative. And that gag of yours about you and Sheila sticking close when the chips are down—that's one for the books. You hated her guts. Especially since your father died and left all his dough in a hundred thousand dollar annuity for Sheila."

That hit the kid where he lived.

Mac came in then, seeing where I was going. "Sure, we know about that annuity," he said. "Also we know that you get whatever is left when Sheila dies. Maybe you hastened the process a little."

"You're nuts, all of you!" Paul yelled. "If that cockeyed charge is true, why do you think I would voluntarily show up here?"

"You had to," I said. "To identify Sheila's body, and identify yourself as her brother. Otherwise, an unknown woman named Burton would be dug under and you could never prove your sister was dead."

Paul whirled on Mac. "I've told you where I was when those two people were killed.

Why don't you check? I was never within two hundred miles of this town in my life until this morning."

"He checked," I said. "We know you weren't here. You didn't kill Dirk and Sheila. But you knew Sheila was going to be killed because you and the killer engineered it together. You had a motive but also an alibi. The killer, being here on the spot, had no alibi, but he also had no apparent motive. It was a neat setup."

Mac couldn't take it any longer. "Who are you talking about, Scotty?" he demanded. "Who did it?"

"Luke Adlis," I said.

There was the briefest sort of pause, and then a crash. Luke hurled his chair toward the door and tried to go after it. One of Mac's boys caught a chairleg in the face and blood spurted. But he held his ground and the other cops closed in. Adlis sat down again, by request.

"Make sense," he growled at me.

"Try this for size," I said. "You uncovered Sheila's real identity some time last summer. I don't know how, but it's not too hard to figure. Her picture has been in the New York papers plenty of times. And anybody who knew that much about her would also know that her brother was a crazy kid, and that he hated Sheila's insides because of the money angle. The story was public property.

"It's easy enough to believe that you needed money yourself, and needed it bad. Any man with a taste for curves finds himself over a barrel some day, and all the real estate sales in the world won't take up the slack. My guess is that some of those females on your wall put you through the jumps, and you had to get hold of some dough to keep your head above water. It's happened to better men than you."

"You're off your nut," Adlis snapped. "Suppose I had found out who Sheila really was. What would that mean?"

"It could mean a key to the heavy sugar you wanted," I said. "It didn't have to, but it could, and you weren't losing anything by trying. The way I dope it, you contacted Paul during the winter and felt him out. Paul was plenty willing to play ball, for a

lot of reasons. The two of you agreed that if Sheila came back this summer, Adlis would knock her off and Paul would split the money with him later. There would be no apparent contact at all between the two of you. Paul, with his motive, would be sitting in Bayview guzzling highballs at the time of the murder. Luke would be here, but why should he have any reason to kill a girl named Burton who was just another summer resident?"

"What about Martell?" Mac demanded. "Where did he fit in?"

"HE DIDN'T," I said. "My hunch is that he just stumbled along and had to be put out of the way. According to Billie, he had trailed Sheila here. He's been blackmailing her ever since that marriage of theirs was hushed up. She gave him the slip last summer, but this time he got wind of where she was headed. He came down, went to Luke Adlis as the town rental agent to find out where she was living. Luke saw his whole plan collapsing, and followed Dirk to Sheila's house. Luke blasted him, and probably didn't have time to get the body out before Sheila and I came along, so he stuffed him in the closet. Maybe some of those details are wrong, but I think most of them will check pretty well."

"You're guessing," Adlis rasped. "You're making up stories. You have no proof."

I looked at Mac. He wasn't talking, but I could see that he wanted proof, too.

"Put the pieces together and you've got a picture," I said. "Gabe McCarver was the one who started me thinking. I asked him if Sheila had written Paul, and the answer was no. But he mentioned at the same time that Luke had written somebody on Long Island. That, of course, meant nothing at all so far as proof was concerned. But it could have been a letter telling Paul to come on down here and identify his sister, who would be taken care of by the time he arrived. It didn't have to be that, but it was enough to make me do some more thinking. Paul had to have a contact here, and Luke might be the guy.

"I began to remember things. I remembered that only Sheila and Luke had keys—

and the door to the house was open when Sheila and I got there. That gag of Luke's about a third key being lost was just a little added horseradish. I remembered that Luke was supposed to meet Sheila when she arrived, only he didn't show up, and he had no alibi because he was out at the house killing Dirk."

I stopped long enough to fire a cigarette. "But the clincher came from Luke himself. He mentioned to me and Paul this morning that Sheila had bought the fog bell off the *Mary Ellen*. That bell was sold last night, just as Ma McCarver was closing up. Ma headed out of the hotel right afterwards, and was gone all evening. Nobody would have known about that bell, or that Sheila had bought it, except the killer. He saw it last night at Sheila's house."

That did it.

Suddenly Adlis folded. He tried to shove more of the blame on Paul, and Paul yelled back at him, and before they were through Mac had his case wrapped up.

I left the office with Billie Mason. The fire was all gone from her system, and her eyes weren't flashing any more. They were as dull and damp as the fog.

"Forget about Dirk," I said gruffly. "You can do better."

It was pretty clear that Billie didn't think so. "Where are you going, copper?"

"I'm not a copper," I said. "I'm going back to the city."

"I thought you were on vacation."

The fog was all the way through me now, like the memory of Sheila's body.

"Yeah," I said. "I thought so too. Maybe I was. I don't know."

And I went back to the hotel to pack.



"It's Only for Dames That Guys Risk Their Necks!"

That's what the mobsters told Detective Wade when he joined them—impersonating Jim Cox, a member of the gang. Wade got by as one of the hoods without trouble and was all set to bust up a million dollar haul. But that was before a sultry babe upset his plans in—

THE SLEEPING CITY

A Novel of the Mob and a Moll

By MARTY HOLLAND



FEATURED NEXT ISSUE—PLUS MANY OTHER HARD-HITTING
CRIME AND MYSTERY THRILLERS!

He struck and struck again



Alas, Poor Horace

By CARTER CRITZ

He married for money—but faced frustration. . . .

ABIGAIL was very unreasonable about dying. As a matter of fact, Horace was haunted by the horrid thought that she might live long enough to be his widow.

He had set his trap to lure the fly but Abigail turned into a very real and earnest spider; and the twenty thousand dollars which baited him in the beginning was still the unobtainable lure.

Despite his frustration, Horace realized Abigail had not actually lied when she led him to believe she was richly endowed with coin of the realm; though it was not until Horace had made Abigail his wife that he learned the husband who preceded him had been a shrewd and far-seeing individual. Perhaps it was because he knew what a temptation a widow's mite could be to the

unscrupulous, that Horace's predecessor had left his worldly goods in the impregnable fastness of an iron-clad trust fund.

On the first of each month, barring Sundays, Saturdays and legal holidays, the National Savings & Guarantee Trust credited two hundred dollars to Abigail's account.

To add to the burden which had fallen on his shoulders like the mantle of Job, Horace was forced to violate one of the cardinal tenets which had guided his life. Horace went to work.

In a rosy flush of a furious courtship Abigail had appeared a young and well-kept fifty. Of course Horace had realized that numerous additional natal anniversaries were concealed beneath the artifices of her facade, and he had enough larceny in his soul not to begrudge anyone the right to

grease the slide just a little so the sucker would be primed for a quick and easy fall.

He himself was a sprightly sixty with a cherubic pink face conditioned by frequent visits to the barber; and with hands soft and supple and full of the confidence of knowing they were always able to pluck a living from the world's hip pocket.

Abigail had come almost as a reward from the benign providence that had watched over Horace all his life. Her twenty thousand would buy him a small white cottage in the country. In the comfort and ease he had earned, he would spend the twilight years puttering in a flower-filled garden. His eyes grew moist as he saw himself, an old, white-thatched squire, beloved and respected by his neighbors.

THE first shock came on their marriage night. Resplendent in a silken robe, with a roguish knot in the tassled cord that encircled his well-kept middle, Horace finger-brushed his distinguished military mustache—and saw the swift dissolution of his bride.

Abigail spread—he could not in all honesty use the word sat—on the vanity seat, a lumpy, dumpy, frowsy old woman. The garments that had lent a false allure of charm to her body, lay carelessly across the back of a chair, a taunting, hypocritical mass of cunningly contrived steel and elastic.

Horace watched with awesome rapture as his bride began the rapid performance of an established and practiced ritual.

Abigail put a purple-veined hand to her scarlet mouth, and in the mirror Horace saw a vision vanish. He saw the sudden sag in her cheeks, the puckered inward compression that gave her thin lips the appearance of a half-eaten prune. The powder-caked, rouge-filled wrinkles of her face seemed almost obscene. The set of dentures resting comfortably in a glass tumbler leered at Horace, and he imagined them to be the wavering phantasm of a libidinous crone.

He watched with mounting horror the swift application of a mud pack. As it hardened and tightened and grew ash gray under his gaze, he could see nothing but a mouldy and decaying shroud that had some-

how lost its grave and was searching for a home.

Abigail put on a chin strap, tied it neatly, and turned to Horace with a coy look on her mud-set face. She held out her arms in a submissive invitation.

Abigail was ready for her marriage bed.

The sense of a mounting and trapped frustration grew in Horace with the passing weeks. The two hundred dollars which came to Abigail each month was tossed into the insatiable maw of the glittering establishments that sold an ephemeral illusion of youth.

Horace sought in vain for a plan to get the principal of the trust fund into his hands; but Abigail's departed first spouse had been fiendishly cunning. The money would lie there, buried in its own Ft. Knox, as long as Abigail lived. When her spirit left to join that of her first husband, the twenty thousand would go to her heirs.

It became necessary for Horace to meet the daily bills; to take care of the butcher and the baker and the landlord. In short, Horace reflected bitterly, he had become burdened with all the vices and none of the pleasures of husbandhood.

Horace reached the stage where he longed passionately for the existence of a physical hereafter so he could have the pleasure of punching in the nose of Abigail's departed first husband. Had he not been so mercenary, had he been content like any self-respecting male to trust in his wife's wisdom, he would have left the money outright to Abigail. And Horace would have been able, after a decent interval, to relieve her of the worry and obligation of handling such a sum. Eventually Horace, himself, would have vanished, and the affair ended.

The day came when Horace was faced with a critical choice. His bankroll was almost gone and the bills kept mounting. Abigail was opening charge accounts, living blithely, seeming to grow younger in spirit with each passing day.

Two courses of action lay open to Horace. He could accept defeat gracefully and vanish into the mist. Or he could get a job and see if he could outlive Abigail.

Horace got the job. It had become a point of honor to see if he could not eventually outwit the peasant who had taken Abigail to spouse when her charms were fresh and existent.

To circumvent the possible existence of any relatives, though Abigail claimed she had none, Horace made a will, leaving to her all his earthly possessions. Not to be outdone, Abigail followed suit.

FROM then on Horace offered a daily prayer for the swift and painless demise of his spouse. The sin, he reflected, would be on the departed husband who had laid such temptation in Horace's path.

Horace went to work as a shill in Nick Drago's Club Satan. He made an impressive figure in his tailored tuxedo and lent a much-needed air of respectability to the joint. Patrons were comforted by the sight of him and felt safely complacent. He sat in front of the roulette table with nonchalant ease, placing his wagers with lordly disdain. The suckers watched him eagerly, saw how often he won, and decided that the wheel must be honest.

Abigail grumbled a bit at the unconventional hours necessitated by his position. She wanted to change her routine to conform with his so they might not lose any precious hours. But on that point Horace was firmly adamant.

The cat-burglar began his raids two weeks after Horace went to work. Abigail raised such a howl that Horace was forced to the necessity of surreptitiously leaving the Club Satan for an hour each night to see her safely tucked in bed and to make certain all the windows and doors were securely bolted.

This particular night Horace had a headache; and he was becoming mortally wearied of the whole affair. He made a perfunctory check of the house, then came into the bedroom to say good-night.

Abigail lifted her mud-masked face for a kiss and Horace retreated in unconscious alarm. Abigail began to cry. She pointed an accusing finger at him.

He had robbed her of her beauty and now he was fired of her . . . She didn't believe he had a job . . . It was just an excuse for

him to get out to meet new girl friends.

Abigail's puckered lips taunted him . . . they hissed and spat like a foul serpent . . . and Horace slapped her across the face. He felt an instant flush of shame and tried to stammer an apology.

But Abigail was not to be placated. It served her right, she sobbed, for getting married again. She should have known that no man could be as good and as kind and as wise and as noble as her dear departed first husband.

Her toothless gums yawed at him and a red mist floated in front of his eyes. He saw the yammering face of Abigail's dead husband and a rage filled his being. Horace's fingers closed on Abigail's curling iron and he picked it up and struck and struck. And struck again.

The mist cleared slowly and Horace saw what he had done. Abigail lay crumpled at his feet. He needed no second sight to know she was dead.

The first moment of shock passed and Horace's mind began to function. He was sorry for what he had done but there was no time for futile regrets. He used a piece of tissue to wipe his prints from the handle of the curling iron, then stuffed the tissue into a pocket to be disposed of on his way back to the Club Satan.

With the back of his hand he knocked a few objects to the bedroom floor, then made certain the window was open. Before he left he pocketed some jewelry to be tossed down a convenient sewer. Another victim to be laid at the door of the phantom cat-burglar.

Horace spent a restful night at the Club Satan. When his work was over he went to an all-night diner, ate heartily, then walked leisurely home. The presence of several police cars in front of the house did not alarm him. That was to be expected.

The officer in charge was sympathetic. A neighbor had noticed the lateness of the burning lights, looked in the bedroom window, screamed, and notified the police.

Horace was heartbroken. He had just returned from work. This, undoubtedly, was the work of the mysterious cat-burglar. He managed to suggest, without rancor, that

the police had been slightly remiss in their failure to apprehend him.

THE officer in charge agreed. They were doing their best and he hoped Horace would cooperate. There were numerous fingerprints in the house and in the bedroom. To ascertain the presence of any strange ones, it would be necessary to obtain a set of Horace's for comparison.

Horace agreed with the reluctant enthusiasm of any honest citizen. In the course of a rather hectic life Horace had managed to keep free of the law and no fingerprints of his lay in any police department files.

Horace watched and noted with approval the dispatch and efficiency that was displayed in the taking of his prints.

Horace watched them examine his prints, listened as they murmured inaudibly to each other. Then the officer in charge beckoned to him and led the way into the bedroom.

Abigail was still on the floor and the police officer pointed. Horace saw the dried beauty mud on her face. He even saw the clear cut fingerprints etched sharply in the dried mud.

Horace remembered how he had slapped Abigail. He offered no argument to the officer in charge. Horace had never been a poor loser.

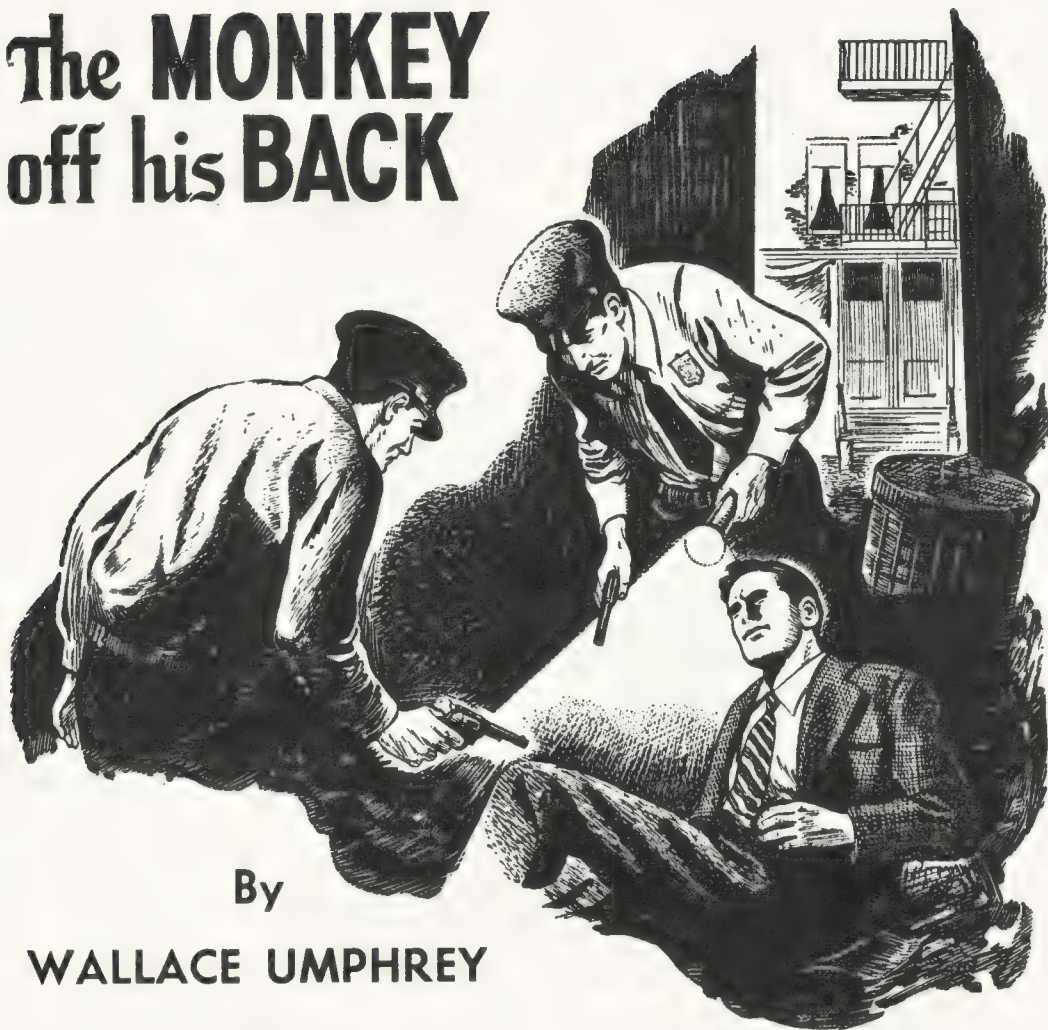
He hoped he would have no trouble finding Abigail's dear departed first husband. Horace was determined to punch him on the nose, even if he had to get into heaven to do it.

INFAMOUS KILLERS

LISTED BELOW (in jumbled fashion) are fourteen infamous killers, and the murders which they committed. Can you match up at least 10 correctly for a passing score? 11-to-12 is good; 13-14 excellent.

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. LIZZIE BORDEN | (a) This one and his accomplice murdered for profit—selling the bodies of victims to medical men. |
| 2. CHARLES GUITEAU | (b) Little Suzanne Degan was horribly murdered by this psychopath. |
| 3. LEON CZOLGOSZ | (c) This fanatic helped start World War I—when he assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. |
| 4. HAWLEY W. CRIPPEN | (d) This one aimed at F.D.R., but killed Chicago's Mayor Anton J. Cermak instead. |
| 5. ROBERT FORD | (e) With his best pal, he committed the famous thrill murder. |
| 6. JACK McCALL | (f) He emptied his pistol into King Alexander I of Yugoslavia. |
| 7. RUTH SNYDER | (g) She "took an axe, and gave her mother forty whacks." |
| 8. VALADA CHERNOZENSKY | (h) President McKinley was shot down by this fanatic. |
| 9. GAVRILO PRINZIP | (i) She and her lover murdered her husband. |
| 10. GIUSEPPE ZANGARA | (j) Wild Bill Hickok was shot in the back by him. |
| 11. WILLIAM HEIRENS | (k) He was "the dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard and laid poor Jesse (James) in his grave." |
| 12. NATHAN LEOPOLD | (l) He shot 12 persons to death in Camden, N. J. |
| 13. BURKE | (m) He assassinated President Garfield. |
| 14. HOWARD UNRAH | (n) This one poisoned his spouse. |

The MONKEY off his BACK



By

WALLACE UMPHREY

IT HAD to be Jo's father. It couldn't be anyone else. It had to be her old man, barreling along at forty in a thirty-mile zone, and his driver's license revoked a month ago for recklessness.

Conroy had said, "Let's squat him, Steve."

Steve Raglan didn't know it was Jo's old man. The streets were glistening wet under the lamps. Steve gave a touch to the siren and switched on the red blinker light. He was a rookie cop and the wail of the siren still made him jumpy. The big sedan pulled

to the curb, waiting for the prowler car to haul up alongside.

"Give it to him good," Conroy said.

Steve said, "Sure."

Rain slanted down in sheets. Maybe Conroy didn't want to get wet. Maybe he was tired. Ordinarily Conroy liked the chance to throw his weight around, but tonight he was in a sullen mood.

Steve felt the rain slap like a wet rag across his face. The sedan was still just a car that had been going too fast. Then

A Rookie Cop's Future Hinges on Giving a Summons for Speeding!

Steve saw Jo's old man sitting alone behind the wheel and looking at him out of the rolled-down window. "That Conroy!" Steve said, wishing suddenly that Conroy'd shouldered some of the load tonight.

Jo's old man stormed, threatened, then pleaded. Steve kept as quiet as he could. Things were bad enough already and he tucked his chin down while he filled out the summons, knowing already what Jo's old man thought of any guy who'd join the Force. "Cops!" Steve had heard it often enough. "Always with a hand out. Always after the angles. Plenty tough pushing people around, but ready to duck out from under when a crook comes up with a gun in his hand."

While he wrote out the summons Steve wondered where Jo was tonight. He didn't ask. This wasn't the time to mention Jo Buffano's name.

Steve watched the sedan drive away, then piled back into the prowl car. He was still holding the book open in his hand. Conroy swung the book around, glanced at it, then whistled. Steve grabbed for the book and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he remembered to shut off the red blinker light.

"What'd he say?" Conroy asked.

"Plenty," Steve said. "He's like everybody else—only a little worse."

"Yeah."

"Nobody loves cops." Steve hesitated. "He tried to bribe me to tear up the ticket."

"He'll get the boom dropped on him."

"Maybe not."

Conroy said curiously, "How much did he offer?"

Steve shrugged. "Twenty bucks."

"He'd have gone higher. You should've chased him up, then settled for fifty." Conroy was grinning. "Now you'll have to tear up the ticket for free. He's your girl's old man, isn't he?"

Steve regarded his partner. Conroy was a big man with a hard, tough, cynical outlook. Sometimes Steve wished he were more like him.

"He was doing forty in a thirty-mile zone," Steve said, looking away from Conroy. "Without a license. He earned that ticket."

Conroy shut off the dome light. He yawned, stretched lazily, then eased down in the seat.

"So you still got that monkey on your back," he said.

Four to midnight. Steve washed up, changed his clothes, then filled out his reports. He was a tall, lanky young fellow with dark eyes, and his hair had a reddish tinge. He was far from handsome, but the line of his jaw was clean and strong.

The desk sergeant, Lonny Zerbic, a fat gray-haired cop with over twenty years' service on the Force, hailed Steve on the way out.

"Call for you," he said cheerfully. "She wants you to phone right away."

Steve took the scrap of paper, knowing it was Jo even before looking at the number. He wasn't surprised, and it didn't make him too happy.

He leaned on the desk. "Does a cop always have a choice to make?"

"Everybody's got choices. It ain't just cops." Zerbic was looking at him. "You put in for a transfer yet?"

"Conroy's okay."

"Yeah," said Zerbic. "Like a hole in the head."

DRIVING out to see Jo, Steve tried to have a solid look at things. He'd phoned Jo and she wanted to see him right away. She wouldn't say why, but Steve knew. He knew, all right.

That monkey Conroy was always talking about was getting heavier and heavier on his back. He knew how to get rid of it, only he wasn't ready just yet. He had to decide whether or not to be like Conroy. It was like turning left or right at a crossroads. When he made his choice he'd be okay.

Jo's kiss was cool, and right away Steve knew everything was changed.

"I want to talk to you, Steve," she said in a businesslike way, and he followed her into the living room. "Dad didn't want me to call you."

"Yeah," Steve said.

The radio was turned down low. Jo sat on the davenport and Steve wanted to sit

beside her but he took a chair across the room instead. Jo was twisting her fingers and Steve watched her for a while, then he got up and snapped off the radio. Jo's old man wasn't around.

"You know his pride," Jo said. "His temper, too. I talked him into letting me call you." Her engagement ring flashed in the light. "He shouldn't have offered money. He's sorry now, ashamed of himself. But he was desperate. Steve, do you know what it's like to feel trapped?"

"Sure."

"I made him promise to go to bed before I called you."

"Forty in a thirty zone. No license."

"Nobody was hurt."

"No."

"The streets were empty—"

"Let's not argue," Steve said. "Why weren't you driving him tonight?"

"It was my fault," Jo told him. "There was something I wanted to do—a shower for a girl who's getting married next week. You had to work, didn't you?"

"I got to work every Saturday night."

Jo jumped up. "I'll make coffee and sandwiches."

Steve sat there. So Jo's old man had taken a chance. Why were people always taking chances with the law? Jo had wanted to go to a shower and her old man had barreled through a thirty-mile zone without a license. People always bragged about getting away with breaking a law, but beefed like hell when they got caught at it.

For the past month Jo had picked up her father at the restaurant. Jo's old man owned it, a new place just getting started. Small and swanky and intimate. It was the kind of place where Steve couldn't afford to buy a meal and couldn't even read the menu if he had that kind of dough. Every night Jo's old man would close the place, count the money and put it in the safe, and then drive home with Jo. But tonight Jo had wanted to go to a shower and her old man had got a ticket.

Another cop, now. Another cop might've given Jo's old man a break. Another cop might've believed his story about leaving his license in his other pants and let him

off with a warning. Only Steve, maybe, would know about the revoked license.

It had to be Jo's old man, Steve thought. It had to be him Conroy told him to squat.

Jo came back with a tray, the stone in her engagement ring flashing in the light. It was a small stone, but the best Steve could afford. Conroy was always pointing it out: a cop's pay was a big joke. Sometimes Steve got tired of Conroy's beefing. Still, Conroy had everything worked out easy in his mind.

Steve took a bite of his sandwich, scalded his mouth on the hot coffee. He couldn't read Jo's face. Faces never told much about what was inside. Jo was a pretty girl with dark hair and a nice figure inside a simple wool dress. Her eyes were greenish-gray with more green than gray. Steve hoped she wasn't thinking about giving the ring back.

"I haven't turned in the summons yet," Steve said.

Jo smiled eagerly. "Steve, I'm glad!"

"Maybe it won't be so bad," Steve said. "Tell him to give his story without losing his temper or getting excited. Probably he'll get off with a fine. But he'd better not drive again."

"Oh, he won't touch the car." Jo was leaning forward. "The publicity. It'll be bad for the restaurant. The papers will carry it. Dad's having a hard enough time now." Her greenish eyes got intense. "Don't turn in the ticket, Steve. Just tear it up."

Steve looked at his half-eaten sandwich. "If I tear it up," he said after a while, "what about the rest of the guys who break the law? Do I let them off too?"

"This is different."

Steve didn't feel hungry any more. He wanted to get away. No use eating himself out for Jo tonight, not the way she was feeling. She began twisting her ring again, and Steve was scared she'd take it off. Better get out before she really did. Steve tried to have an honest look at himself. He was just a young guy without much in the way of brains, without much on the ball in the way of looks. No better and no worse than Mr. Average walking along the street. It made him weak in the knees, thinking of

Jo giving him the gate.

She walked to the door with him. Steve wanted to kiss her, but he knew she wouldn't have it. Not now.

"If you love me," she said, "you'll tear up the ticket."

"Yeah," Steve said.

SOMETIMES four o'clock in the afternoon rolls around too fast. Steve had his clothes changed a few minutes early. He hadn't called Jo today and he wasn't going to. No percentage. No use knocking himself out.

From the looks of things Conroy was going to give him a bad time. Conroy's mood was more sullen than yesterday.

"Talk nice to me, pal," Conroy said. "You never turned in that summons last night. I checked."

It was a bad day, Sunday, cold and rainy, and the police radio taking a nap for itself. Steve and Conroy cruised around. Conroy beefed monotonously about the bad weather, the routine, the low pay, everything. It got dark and they stopped at a hamburger joint and Conroy dawdled over the food and kidded the waitress. Conroy was always on the make. A small gray-haired man fussing in the kitchen kept scowling at him. Probably the waitress was the old guy's daughter.

When Conroy found out he couldn't make any time, he slid off the stool. Steve paid his check, but Conroy just stood there picking his teeth. The old guy came out of the kitchen and said, "How about your check?"

Conroy laughed. "You got protection. What keeps some punk from sticking you up?" He thumped his chest. "Me. You can't have everything."

Steve tooled the prowler car along. That Conroy! Conroy was so sure of himself that most of the other cops were a little awed. Only Lonny Zerbic saw things different. "Get yourself a transfer, Steve," Zerbic was always saying. "I like to see a youngster started off right. It's a guy like Conroy who gives the cops a bad name." Steve didn't know.

Zerbic claimed that Conroy was a braggart and a yellow-belly. "Get out from under his influence," he told Steve. "They

say there's a rotten apple in every box." But the other cops kept quiet. Conroy was hard and tough and maybe they were a little afraid of him. Only old Lonny Zerbic sounded off.

"You and me," Conroy'd said when Steve had first been teamed up with him. "We'll get along if you keep your nose clean. Don't preach and don't tell me what to do. This is a lousy racket and you got to take what you can get. I been through the mill." It seemed funny, Steve thought sometimes, that Conroy never got a promotion. "Everybody thinks a cop is a dirty stinker with his hand out," Conroy was always saying. "Why disappoint 'em?"

Steve felt a sense of loyalty toward Conroy. "It might be a cleaner racket," he sometimes wanted to say, "if the Conroys were out of it." But Conroy was his partner and he never opened his yap.

"Damn Zerbic," Conroy said now.

"What?"

"Always talking about me behind my back."

"He's okay."

"Some dark night he'll be walking home. That's when he'll get it."

Steve said, "That'd be smart, wouldn't it?"

Conroy grinned. "Sure."

"You want everything for nothing."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," Steve said. "Maybe there's things a guy ought to work for."

Later Steve glanced at his watch. Just about time now for Jo's old man to be closing the restaurant. Jo would be driving down to pick him up.

Steve was angry at himself. That had been great last night. Like a dope he'd stood there and only said "Yeah" to Jo instead of all the things he wanted to tell her. Saturday night, and he'd had to work until midnight. The night a guy ought to be stepping out with his girl. "If you love me—" Jo'd said. What did she think, anyway? That'd been great, all right.

"I got to see Jo," Steve said.

"Her old man'll be glad to see you too."

"Yeah." Steve grinned. "I'll bet."

"Why take any guff from him?"

"I don't mind—much." Steve thought

about it. "He doesn't mean half what he says. Everybody likes to sound off. When he's got me for a son-in-law he'll decide a cop is okay."

"On a cop's pay when'll that be?"

"I'll make out."

"You got it bad."

"He's okay."

Conroy laughed. "You say that about everybody."

Sure. Everybody was okay. Everybody except Steve himself, and that was wrong—somehow, somewhere.

THE restaurant was next to an alley on a dim and quiet street. The next street over was a brightly lighted thoroughfare. No sign of Jo yet. Well, Conroy wouldn't mind waiting. Steve parked the prowl car out in front. Jo'd be along.

A young punk came out of the restaurant, closing the door carefully behind him. A skinny young punk, nattily dressed and kind of nervous. For a moment he stood there, a hand inside his coat. Just a guy who'd eaten a late dinner—

Only Jo's old man's closing time was half an hour ago.

"Hey!" Steve called out.

The punk had started to run. Maybe he hadn't spotted the prowl car at first. He dove for the mouth of the alley.

"Stick-up," Steve said.

"Maybe not," Conroy told him.

"Lost his head. Shouldn't have run."

"You want to tell him that?"

Steve gave the orders. "Block this end of the alley. I'll go around. He won't dare run toward the lights. We'll box him. He'll give up without an argument."

"Maybe he's got a gun," Conroy argued.

"Then he's got a gun," Steve said.

Conroy blinked. "Let's go."

Steve ran down the block. He hit the bright lights still running, and a couple of people turned to watch him. Steve dropped to a fast walk. No use advertising what was going on. Better not have a crowd at his back. Somebody might get hurt.

He cut up the alley. The bright lights of the main drag were behind him now. The alley was a long black tunnel with danger

lurking somewhere along its length. Steve halted abruptly, unlimbering his Police Positive. Danger. He hadn't considered that before.

Steve was breathing hard. His lungs couldn't get enough air. It was like being submerged in water. Conroy was at the other end of the alley, boxing off their quarry. Steve told himself they'd flush the punk out. His own breathing sounded loud in his ears. It was going to give him away. What if the punk had a gun? Sure he had a gun—and he'd use it too. Steve got the sudden notion that breathing was bad, something he ought to stop doing for a while.

The alley was filled with metal trash cans. Bump against one of them and the punk's gun would explode, all right. Steve's legs felt stiff and awkward, as if they belonged to somebody else.

Everything was different now. He'd listened to Conroy's talk about dull routine and low pay. It'd made sense. Eight hours a day. You put in your time and that was it. But now it wasn't the same. Now he was putting in everything—maybe his life. And despite all his beefing Conroy was doing the same. That Conroy! This was the part about being a cop that everybody overlooked.

Another step. And then he heard the shot. He could see the flash of flame. A trash can bumped along the alley.

Two more shots. Another. Then nothing.

Conroy had a small pocket flash in his hand when Steve came pounding up. In the beam Steve could see the punk lying among the cans, one leg doubled under him. The skin of the punk's face was stretched tight over his cheekbones; only his eyes seemed alive.

"He tried to kill me," Conroy said.

"You fired first."

Conroy licked his lips. "It was him or me."

"You wouldn't give him a chance," Steve said. "We could've taken him without a shot."

"To hell with that." Conroy laughed, off-key. "I never shot a guy before. I feel funny. Like I'm eight feet tall."

"We got to call an ambulance."

"You call it."

"Was it a stick-up?" Steve asked suddenly. "It's got to be a stick-up."

Conroy bent down and picked up a small cloth bag, shining his light inside. "Judas! Three thousand bucks. Maybe more."

"It's Jo's old man's."

"Fifty-fifty," Conroy whispered. "Fifteen hundred apiece."

Steve said, "What're you trying to say?"

Conroy sucked in his breath. "We saw the punk run out. But before we could catch up with him, he passed the dough to a partner. This partner got away—"

"You couldn't make it stick."

"Nobody can prove different."

IT WAS all there, laid out in front of Steve's eyes. The cheap engagement ring because he could afford no better. Not being able to eat in the restaurant Jo's old man owned. Denying himself things so he could someday get married. All of it. Everybody always thinking a cop had his hand out. Trying to square a traffic rap with a chicken bribe. Not being able to step out Saturday night because of a lousy racket for a job.

That was what Conroy always called it. But maybe people meant Conroy when they sneered at cops. Maybe Conroy was the bad apple. And maybe Conroy was talking sense.

Fifty-fifty. Fifteen hundred apiece.

But there was this other thing. The thing Steve had felt just a moment ago. Pride in himself and in being a cop.

"Nobody can prove different," Conroy repeated.

Steve said, "The punk here?"

"Him?" Conroy sounded crazy. "To hell with him. He's done for. Who cares about a punk like him? Better to—". The gun lifted in Conroy's hand.

And then Steve leaped, hacking the flat of his palm down hard across Conroy's wrist. The gun clattered to the alley. As Conroy lurched forward Steve looped out a balled fist and the big man dropped to his knees.

"The old guy inside," the punk whispered to Steve. "I locked him in the cold freeze. Better get him out."

Steve picked up Conroy's gun. Conroy was just climbing to his feet. Steve stared at him in the darkness.

"Attempted robbery," Steve said. "Attempted murder. You want to try to make a run for it?"

Conroy licked his lips. "No."

Now Steve was sitting in a chair and Jo's old man was out in back someplace and the ambulance was gone and Conroy was slumped down in a chair against the wall. No guts, Steve thought. Conroy'd get the book thrown at him.

Jo came in, her heels clicking across the tile floor. She came to a halt in front of Steve's chair. Before Steve could tell her what had happened, she touched his sleeve.

"Let me say something first," she told him. "I'm sorry about last night. I don't know what I was thinking of. Turn in that summons, Steve! It's all you can do. Dad will take his punishment—"

"It's already turned in," Steve said. "I turned it in before I went on shift today."

Jo's eyes were shining and Steve was standing now, looking down into her face. Faces never told what was inside. Then he looked into her eyes, and maybe he was nuts, but for a brief instant it was like a curtain being pulled aside and he could see everything. It made him feel warm all over, and then the touch of her fingers on the back of his hand told him he hadn't been mistaken.

Steve looked at Conroy, slumped against the wall. Conroy the tough, the hard, the cynical. The guy who believed you had to take what you could get. Conroy the braggart and the coward.

Conroy's mind was free and easy—but so was Lonny Zerbic's. And Zerbic was an honest cop. You had a choice to make and then you were okay, because that first choice made all the others easy.

"No more monkey on my back," Steve said to Conroy. "But what you've got riding you now is a whole lot worse."

HOMICIDE

Murder in the movies isn't too unusual—unless it

takes place on the wrong side of the screen. . . .

CHAPTER I

MURDER MOVIE

TONIGHT was different. Generally, because most muggs haven't enough consideration for a cop to confine their larceny to union hours, I don't get to sit through a whole movie without being paged just as the heroine is wavering. But for once I'd made it; the pictures had been above par, generating sufficient noise and excitement to keep me at least half-awake.

I drifted along with the exit-lurching crowd instead of trying to buck it. The house lights were up and the fire curtain was down and I was anticipating a midnight snack of eggs and a double portion of hickory-cured ham and a quart of coffee, black and strong and without sugar. After which I had an option on a soft bed and twelve wonderful hours to become acquainted with a new mattress.

And at that, I almost made it.

I got as far as the sidewalk and I was standing under the marquee, debating the respective merits of Johnny Luchow's and the White Diner. While Luchow's ham is served with a certified pedigree, their coffee is strictly a fugitive from the brown bean.

But I was interrupted before I could reach a mental epicurean decision.

Plucking fingers were loosing the cross-thread weave in the elbow of my gray tweed jacket, as a result of which a sensory circuit was activated, causing my neck to swivel in a southwesterly arc. I identified the plucking fingers as part of the person of Russel Wolden, manager of the Greenway Theater. And I had the disturbing impression I was looking at a character who has gone under three times and come up but twice.

"There's—there's a man inside!" The nervous words tumbled from a mouth in search of air. "Perhaps you'd better come see him, Lieutenant Bonney." His mouth remained open and the lips were moving but he couldn't force another sound past a constricting throat.

"Relax," I consoled, wondering if the Nile-green shading on his face was a reflection from the overhead lights or the ptomanic aftermath of an out-of-season lobster.

There were a couple of bored workmen

a mystery novelet by
MORRIS COOPER



perched on a scaffold changing the marquee signs, and a dangling preview banner slipped from their hands and fluttered over the manager's head. He squealed as though the seven little demons had him and started to punch his way out of the enveloping cloth.

I pulled the cloth banner off him, gave his one hundred and fifteen muscleless pounds a firm shake, and asked, "What's wrong? Some drunk giving you a hard time?"

His head shimmied from side to side and his faded blue eyes began rolling behind

rimless glasses. "There's a man inside!" he played the same record again. But this time he got to the other side. "He's d-dead!"

There goes my ham and eggs and coffee and my date with the mattress, I reflected bitterly, as I followed Wolden back into the theater. Some citizen, probably, who'd gotten tired of it all and rebelled against the popular custom of kicking off in bed. But no matter how routine a death it was, it'd take me at least a couple of hours to wrap it up. I was almost tempted to turn around, tell Wolden to get the beat cop, and head

for Luchow's. But I didn't.

The man was dead, all right. Only it hadn't been his own idea; someone had helped speed his departure. The body was parked in the center of the last row of the balcony, torso bent over and forehead nestled against the top edge of the backrest of the seat in front of him. He might have been searching for something, or even taking a nap—except for the fact that these things are never done by a man who has consented to the use of the nape of his neck as a pin-cushion.

In this instance the pin was one of those six-inch paring knives you can pick up in any dime store for a quarter. The blade was buried in the man's neck right up to the black, rough-rasped hilt. I didn't even groan inwardly when I saw that handle, because I've never had a case where the murderer left a convenient fingerprint in order to give my mental peregrinations a break.

THE SEATS on either side were turned up, setting him off like an egg in a cardboard container. I edged in a bit and squatted on my haunches, trying to get as good a look as I could without touching anything.

He was a big man; what must once have been a magnificent body was now only a sixty-year-old mountain of suety-soft flesh. The portion of his face I could see was a shroud-grey purple, and a thin waver of broken capillaries criss-crossed the tip of a bulbous nose.

Long arms hung laxly and the nail of his right middle finger was slightly bent where it touched the cigarette-littered carpeting which covered the flooring. A loose, wrinkle-wattled flap of skin below his jawline obscured the beginnings of a triple chin.

A narrow thread of caramel-brown marked a trail from the spot the knife entered; a couple of inches from the wound the trail had run into a hair clump. There the blood trail wavered, finally congealing into the design of a careless ink blot. Without touching it, I knew that blot was the consistency of soft jello; it would take several hours to become a dirt-reddish brittle crust.

Not much blood had seeped past the knife

blade, which wasn't unusual; chances were there'd been an internal hemorrhage. A blue felt hat was jammed to his ears and I didn't think he was the one who'd jammed it there.

There wasn't much I could do until the tech boys got their licks in, so I put a call through for the central homicide squad. Unless the shiv artist was one of the employees, he was long gone. By the time the manager had scuttled after me, gone through his gasping act, and I came back into the theater, the stiff was the only paying customer left. I'd got in on a pass.

While I was waiting, I tried to pin Russel Wolden down to some definite information. But he knew nothing except that his nerves were completely aflutter and the home office would have to send someone to relieve him for the next few days while he rested and regained his shattered faculties. Murder was all very well on the silver screen—but a *faux pas* like this was carrying the bear with a vengeance for even the most unruly of patrons.

I calmed his ruffled plumage until he finally remembered it was one Thomas Galan who had discovered the sleeping customer.

"That's what I thought he was doing, sleeping," the usher told me. "I sort of gave him a gentle nudge and you could have knocked me over with B. Grable when he sagged down and I saw that shiv sticking out from his neck." Galan delivered the information with vocal relish and his eyes glittered brightly in memory as he cocked his head reflectively. "Heck, if it wasn't for the seats in front of him, I'll bet he wouldn't have stopped rolling till he plopped over the edge of the balcony right smack into the orchestra."

Russel Wolden gave a strangled gasp at this fresh effrontery to the dignity of his sedate theater and rushed from his office in frantic search of untainted air. Galan winked at me and a wise old grin flickered momentarily on his youthful face. This was one lad who wasn't bemoaning a fate which had siphoned some of the silver screen's excitement into his life. I could almost hear him laying it on as he spilled all the gory details to his girl friend.

The squad got to the Greenway in ten minutes and in another thirty I had enough facts to get started.

HIS NAME'S Luke Fordham," Sgt. Tinder told me. "Lives on Beachwood Drive. According to his business cards he ran the L-F Plumbing Supply House on Saugus Road. There's a snapshot in his wallet showing him standing in front of the place. Eighty-seven bucks in the wallet, five dollars and eleven cents in his trouser pocket. There's a platinum pocket-watch and a chain which must have set somebody back a grand. Which means, I guess, we can rule out a robbery motive. Unless the killer got chicken and took off without finishing the job. Want me to take Beachwood Drive, Lieutenant?"

"Uh-uh, Mike. What else did the boys find?"

"Well, there were two ticket stubs for tonight's show and a woman's purse in his right jacket pocket. Nothing in the purse but the usual junk. Belongs to Agnew Fordham."

"Wife?" I heard the faint pop of exploding flashbulbs and the tread of perpetually tired feet.

"Could be," Mike Tinder yawned. "Unless it's a daughter or aunt or sister-in-law." He yawned again, tugging at his jaw to lengthen the gaping mouth.

I lit a cigarette because Mike's yawning started giving me ideas about an \$97.65-plus tax mattress which still owed me a hundred bucks worth of sleep. "Doc say anything yet?" I asked.

"Knife did it, all right. Went in on a slant and probably severed the cervical ganglia. Indications of internal hemorrhage. Odds on bet death was practically instantaneous. Killer was on left, or else he had a six-foot arm. And it could've been either a man or a woman." Mike Tinder took a quick breath and kept on ticking off the report in an impersonal tone. "Doc says Fordham was unconscious when his neck was used for a pig-sticker. There's a heavy bruise above the right ear which was made while he was still alive. The bruise was made by something hard and small, say an

inch or so in width at point of contact."

I used an ash tray on the manager's desk to bury my butt. "How long?"

Mike shrugged his hands. "You know Doctor Stamcel, Ray. Maybe three hours, but Doc ain't going to swear to it yet."

"Three hours," I mused. "Even discounting the hour or so the joint's been closed, that body was parked an awful long time in a theater seat without someone tripping over it."

"Maybe not. Some kid usher told me the upper balcony was practically deserted during the last performance."

I checked the glassine-covered time-schedule sheet on Wolden's desk. Three hours ago—nine forty-five—was just twelve minutes before the end of the war picture. And during the final half-hour of that sterling epic, the screen had been turned into a bloody, noise-riveting battlefield. You could have screamed and shot off a dozen guns without attracting the attention of the audience.

Fordham might have struggled or made some outcry when he was conked, but the chances were it would have passed unnoticed unless someone had been displaying particular interest in the last row of the balcony. Which I doubted. Excepting, of course, the cash customer who had doubled as a killer.

Mike said, "Gordon and Roszinski are checking the theater staff, but I don't think they're going to get much."

"It's gotta be done," I said. "Routine. Anything else, Mike?"

"Uh-uh," he shook his head. "The wicker-basket, ghouls are on their way. Doc says his stomach ain't been feeling right all day, so he's going to start right on the autopsy. Figures a little cadaver probing will do more for indigestion than bicarbonate." Mike couldn't keep the shadow of a grin from his lips.

I grinned back, knowing Dr. Stamcel's wry sense of humor. "I think I'll take a run out to Beachwood Drive, Mike. Have radio control dispatch a prowler car to check Fordham's business address. I dunno, maybe we'll be able to stir something up. I want you to stick with Doc and the tech boys.

If I find anything to hold me at Beachwood, I'll keep in touch by phone."

Mike Tinder made the gotcha-circle with thumb and forefinger and I headed out of the theater for the second time. Only now there was no good-natured, jostling crowd to carry me along. The marquee was dark; the workmen had long since finished changing the signs and gone home.

I watched the black, square-backed meat wagon making a left turn at the corner as the driver bucked a red light. The beat cop was shooing away a curious group of spectators; when he saw me he lifted two fingers in a salute. I waved back and got into the coupe Mike Tinder had driven down.

Luchow's beckoned on the way and my imagination filled the coupe with enticing, wafted tendrils of succulent ham. But I didn't waver from the stern course of duty. Besides which, it generally takes my appetite a couple of hours to remember my stomach and forget the odor of a newly created cadaver.

CHAPTER II

CLASS WARFARE



THE HOUSE on Beachwood drive was one of those neat, compact, double-decker cottages you'll find in a certain section of every town; the occupants are almost always straining for a higher run on the ephemeral social

ladder.

A couple dozen feet of close-clipped, anti-septic lawn was geometrically bisected by a flagstone walk. A bilious green distinguished the cottage from its neighbor. The neighbor was flaunting decorum with a gay cerise, and I had a sneaking hunch the guy who was responsible for such a paint job was a thorn in his wife's social ambitions. But on the other hand, I figured, it might also house a back-sliding A.A. who needed a brilliant tocsin to guide him to the proper cracker box.

My soles surrendered a week's wear and tear to the flagstone walk and the rubber

heel on my right shoe showed its disdain by skidding on an offending roundness and almost turning my ankle.

The front door was copper-stripped and riveted to conform with some designer's conception of a pre-Magna Carta battlement entrance. I touched a button under an ivy-disguised letter-box and heard the muted opening chimes of *Beethoven's Fifth*. I pushed it again and got the same notes made famous as the three dots and a dash of the V for victory sign. A thing like that could lead to serious frustrations, so I stopped. It was almost like picking up a book and discovering each page to be an exact duplicate of the one preceding.

Then an overhead light flashed on, spotlighting me with its attention, and a square peephole protected by three vertical bars was opened.

I saw two eyes and a nose and a hair-fuzzed upper lip. Simply looking at some women can tell you they're the kind who turn a house into a happy home, but the female who answered Beethoven's beckoning wasn't one of that breed.

The eyes stared at me so unblinkingly that I wondered if they had lids. Her nose was thin, tapering to an almost sharp and perfect angle, and intended solely for utilitarian purposes; and as if to verify my observation, the pinched nostrils drew tighter, defending their sensitivity from what might be an Assamese untouchable. I got a sudden whiff of something which smelled like stale mouthwash, but my nostrils didn't become offended enough to try and shake hands. And since the necessary practice was lacking, it's a good thing they didn't try; or else I might have shamed myself with an uncouth exhibition of sneezitis.

It was apparent she had no desire to enter into conversation with a stranger, and was waiting for me to make the first move, so I inquired, "Agnew Fordham?" I controlled the childish temptation to indulge in a cavalierly obeisance.

Without relaxing the protection afforded by its suction-sealed nostrils, the nose dipped two degrees. I risked the assumption it was attached to a nodding head and I let her blinkless gaze get a peek at my badge. After

which I asked politely, "May I come in? My business is official and important, or I wouldn't have disturbed you at this time of night."

Those eyes probed me with the efficiency of one of Dr. Stamcel's scalpels, and I had the strangest sensation of nakedness standing there in the grip of the nightlight. Finally, without her yet having uttered a word, the peephole cover clicked into place and the castle gate swung open. I stepped across the sill quickly in order to avoid any concealed moat, and glad to be rid of the irritating spotlight.

I waited while she closed the front door, noting the ankle-length shapeless robe she was wearing and the over-sized man's slippers on her feet. I've seen sacks of potatoes that looked better in their burlap garments.

"I'm sorry it was necessary to awaken you," I addressed her back.

She turned and faced me. "I wasn't asleep," she stated. But the tone implied the statement was not meant to put me at ease; it merely suggested I was in no position to offer her anything, including an apology.

I said, "There are some questions I'd like to ask."

"We'll be more comfortable in the living room. May I take your—" Agnew Fordham left the request unfinished as her glance flicked between my finger-combed hair and my water-chapped hands. An eyebrow elevated a conservative millesimal managed to convey mild surprise that none of the three appendages held a hat.

I explained, "I left it in the car." Which was an outright lie, since I never wear one. But I wanted to assure her I might eventually become a member in good standing of the men of distinction club.

The eyebrow returned to normal and she said, "Come with me, please."

SHE WALKED ahead, as rigid as a West Point plebe on parade, and I followed, unconsciously lagging so as not to step on an invisible train. I could sense her social distaste at the gaucherie of a police force which would permit one of its hirelings to be improperly attired when calling on a

lady. I was abashed, and irritated; and I don't generally indulge in snap likes or dislikes about the people I contact while earning my salary.

The living-room—which reminded me of a spinster-presided, over-stuffed parlor—was furnished in Early American Radio & Newspaper Period. You know what I mean: those sky-priced priceless bargains you can't afford to miss—and forever after you wish you had. But I guess the stuff wasn't altogether in the neo-future-zany class because I recognized the purpose for which some of the pieces had been created.

She sat down on an alleged chair and I found a clear space where I could stand without bumping into anything. Her blinkless eyes snared me within their focus again, apparently assuming I had remained erect out of deference to my betters. "Yes?" she inquired. "*What* is it you wish . . . Mr.—" The *what* was emphasized delicately; the slight pause before she conferred the freedmans' title was barely perceptible.

I could see gray roots clashing with dyed hair which had faded to the shade of sun-withered corn stalks. Then I remembered I was a guardian of the public welfare and not an arbiter of its quasi-social dicta. So I magnanimously gave her the benefit of my doubt and decided the coiffure might pass a casual inspection if she ever reached a permanent decision in respect to a stable color.

That eyebrow elevated again in a wordless repetition of her question. I introduced myself. "I'm Lieutenant Raymond Bonney." I waited a second before I added, "Homicide," letting it hang by itself in a blank silence. It works, sometimes.

This was one of the times it didn't.

"Homicide?" Agnew Fordham seemed to savor the word, and then dismiss it as unsuitable to her palate. I could almost see the ruffling pages of her mental dictionary as she searched for the exact definition of the term. Her thin lips pinched together, giving her mouth the appearance of a shadow-cleft fold of dehydrated skin. But there was no fluttering, no panting, not even a display of real curiosity. Merely the reaction of a rarefied hostess who has found herself con-

fronted with an ill-bred and uninvited guest.

She didn't say anything else, evidently feeling it was up to me to add impetus to the conversational ball. I watched her a few seconds while I debated on an operational approach. I was almost sorry I hadn't sent Mike Tinder in my place. I wondered idly if I were becoming a victim of class prejudice, and comforted myself by deciding it was merely a mild form of torture devised by my stomach because I had neglected its midnight feeding.

Agnew Fordham waited patiently, perched almost on the rim of the chair, and I wouldn't have been surprised to see her maintain the same position of formal rigidity if someone had rudely and suddenly jerked the seat from beneath her. She waited, motionless hands folded on her lap, neat and prim; she was trying so desperately, and failing, not to look like the drab and faded fifty-odd she was.

THERE are different ways of breaking the news, some not strictly according to the book of regulations. This, I finally concluded, was a time which required a hedging act disguised to appear as a straight-from-the-shoulder approach.

I asked, "Are you a relative of Luke Fordham?"

"His wife." There wasn't any pride in the admission, but her voice was controlled, the pulse in her neck steady.

"He's dead," I said bluntly, trying not to feel like too much of a heel. I swung it like a Sunday punch; too harshly, perhaps, because of the irritation this house had stirred in me.

"Dead?" Agnew Fordham rolled with the punch, impatient of my statement. "He couldn't possibly have been in an accident." How dared an accident invade the privacy of her world? "Why, I was with him only a few hours ago."

"He wasn't in any accident," I said, feeling like a confounded ass because I'd allowed myself to act as a stupid boor. But I had to keep it up. "Unless you class murder as an accident."

"Murder!"

It was a whisper, but more startling than any shout. Her mouth discarded the alien

word, grimacing at its vileness. And for the first time I saw her blink, the lids lowering like curtains, shutting the stage from the spectator's view. Then Agnew Fordham did the one thing which could have surprised me—she keeled over in a dead faint.

I checked her pulse, her respiration; and I'd had enough experience to know she wasn't shamming.

I was disgusted with myself and a little ashamed. In a way, I was a bigger snob than Agnew Fordham—if she was a snob. At least she had behaved as a lady; while I had allowed a senseless irritation make me forget I was a cop, and act like one of the totalitarian boys.

"Well!"

A stinging voice from the living room entrance spun me around. "What kind of way is that to break bad news, young man?" The questioner was a little woman; little and dumpy and round and reminding me of Queen Victoria in a starched house dress.

I gawked at her.

"Well!" she snapped again. "Don't just stand there like a fool, man. Help me get my daughter to her room and then I'll call the doctor."

"Yes, ma'am!" I gulped.

"Name's Mrs. Andrew Queely. Grab hold, or do policemen only have feet?"

I grabbed hold.

CHAPTER III

TESTY TESTIMONY



THE KITCHEN walls were papered in imitation white tile. I was sitting down, sipping at a tepid coke while I watched Mrs. Queely do a Houdini to a tumblerful of sloe gin. Agnew Fordham was in bed; the doctor had come and gone, diagnosed it as a mild case of shock, saying she'd be all right after a little rest.

While we were waiting for the doctor I'd gotten the names of Luke Fordham's employees—there were only three—and talked to Mike Tinder on the phone.

"Put a check on them right away," I said. "And first chance you get, send a matron over here."

"Something cookin', Ray?"

"I dunno." There was a *feeling* in the air which wasn't right; you get it once in a while after you've been cop long enough—especially when you're dealing with people who haven't committed a crime before. Maybe it's because, subconsciously, we *smell* fear. Though I was honest enough to admit to myself I might be imagining all this merely to salve my conscience. I added to Mike, "Won't do any harm, anyway."

"Okay," he said, and hung up.

I sat by the phone a moment. At the other end of the long hallway, through the open door of a bedroom, I could see Mrs. Queely fussing over her daughter.

I didn't expect much from a check of Fordham's employees, but you never can tell. And I like them only half-awake for whatever story they have to tell. I don't mind a faltering guy—most folk become nervous when suddenly confronted by the police. The character I'm always a bit leery of is the one who can tell me exactly where he was on the night of the thirteenth, at precisely seven forty-two, Greenwich Mean Time.

After the doctor had left, Mrs. Queely had steered me into the kitchen and I was just tired enough to go along meekly. I was familiar with that pumping gleam in her bright little eyes; might be if I primed her the least bit I'd be able to work the pump handle myself.

She had on a comfortable-looking bathrobe and I could see the tips of a pair of warm slippers. Her snow-gray hair was caught in a bun with a thin red ribbon.

"Now," she demanded, refilling her tumbler with reddish-pink fire and grimacing at my coke, "what's all this falderal and piffle about Luke being murdered?"

"Murder is never falderal or piffle," I admonished sternly. "It's the last resort of an animal mentality." I wondered if my unctuous words were really as stuffy as they sounded.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Queely said, bringing me down to size. "I daresay you know any

number of persons whose sudden and violent demise would cause you no undue heartache."

It was an incongruous statement, coming from that dumpy little woman, and yet it seemed a revealing balance for the glass of gin she held in her cupped hands. I didn't have any answer, so I gargled a bit more of my lukewarm drink.

Mrs. Queely placed the tumbler on the cream-enameled kitchen table. Then she folded her hands on her lap the way Agnew Fordham had. The mother, like the daughter, was neat; but without that disconcerting air of primness. The daughter might give you the feeling of a decrepit, aged fifty, but Mama was an alert and gay and vivacious young eighty.

Her tone was almost indifferent—perhaps it was the very casualness of the words which made them cut like a whet-stoned blade. "The nicest thing I can say about Luke is to hope he didn't suffer too much."

I gave up on my warm drink and put it on the table alongside hers. "Why should he have suffered?" I asked. "I didn't tell you how Luke Fordham met his death."

"*Piffle!*" she said, and her face wrinkled into the smiling likeness of a dried prune. "You distinctly said he was murdered."

I nodded. "But murder isn't always accompanied with physical pain for the victim."

She shrugged one shoulder, dismissing my enlightening information. "That's your business, Lieutenant Bonney, and you approach it with an analytical mind. But I maintain that to the average person the word murder implies a violent and painful death."

I SAW that was one point I wasn't going to win and I surrendered gracefully. I hooked a heel over the bottom rung of the kitchen chair I was sitting on and got back to routine ground.

"When did you last see your son-in-law?"

"Last night."

The electric clock on the kitchen wall said one-fifty-eight. "You mean the evening just passed?"

"I do not." She was enjoying this, and evidently determined to volunteer no more information than was asked of her.

This time I was more explicit. "When, exactly, did you last see Mr. Fordham?"

She squinted at the red hands on the electric clock. "At eight P.M. Precisely twenty-nine hours and fifty-eight and three-quarter minutes ago."

I didn't let her bait me. "You mean he wasn't home today? That is," and I couldn't keep a vague tinge of sarcasm from my question, "you didn't see him at all during the day that ended at midnight?"

"That's two questions, Lieutenant. To the first one, yes, he was home. To the second one, no, I did not see him."

"Would you mind explaining?"

She shoved the coke glass away from her gin. "Nothing mysterious, Lieutenant. Luke generally left the house at seven-thirty in the morning. Since I don't rise until eight, I never see—" she corrected the syntax—"I never saw him during a weekday morning. But I heard him as usual."

"You couldn't sleep?"

She grinned impishly. "Nothing wrong with my conscience, young man. It was merely that Luke was as quiet as an infuriated ox."

"Didn't he come home for supper?"

"As a rule, yes." Mrs. Queely took an almost ladylike sip and put the gin tumbler back on the table. "But this was one evening he did not."

"Are you certain? I mean, he might have come in while you were out."

"I didn't leave the house. I was in all day."

"What about your daughter?"

"What *about* Agnew?"

"Was she home all day, too?"

"No. Agnew met Luke downtown. They had dinner and went to a movie."

"Was that unusual?"

"No." A faint trace of bitter irony crept into her voice. "Luke made a point of taking her to dinner and a movie once a week. It was his way of proving to the world he wasn't a neglectful husband. Even if Agnew had no choice as to which restaurant they dined at or which movie they saw."

"Then after they returned home, Mr. Fordham went out again—alone?"

"Did he?"

"I'm asking you."

"Oh—" Mrs. Queely rocked a bit, like a little pound ball. It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd rolled off the chair and bounced on the linoleum. "I thought you were telling me."

"What time was it when they arrived home after the show?"

"They didn't come home."

"No?" I waved a hand in the general direction of the bedroom where Agnew Fordham was sleeping.

"My daughter came home alone."

"Why?"

"You'll have to ask her."

"You don't know why?"

"It's none of my affair."

"As you would say, Mrs. Queely, piffle!" I remembered this was a household which one of its members had left forever. "Murder is a dirty business. It might help if you could think of me merely as an impersonal machine asking questions which need to be answered."

"Very well," Mrs. Queely said. "Agnew came home alone because they'd had an argument."

"What about?"

"I don't know what *this* one was about."

"There have been others?"

"It would have been better if my daughter had died the day before she became Luke Fordham's wife." The words settled over me like a dank pall. I shivered.

"Then there has been dissension between Mr. and Mrs. Fordham for some time?" The question sounded foolish, but I waded in doggedly. I didn't want a silence that would settle and harden and freeze.

SHE STIRRED wearily. "If you want to know whether my daughter had reason to kill her husband, why don't you ask me?"

"All right," I said. "Did she?"

"Did she what?"

I sighed. "Did your daughter have reason to murder her husband?"

"Yes." The sounds fell like bricks from her mouth, cementing Luke Fordham into the grave that was waiting for him. "I've lived with them for twenty years, watching her die a little each day. I've watched him

drain every penny she had; kill every gentle emotion in her soul; turn her into an empty, vacuous hulk that never had a chance to be a woman."

I stood up, got my coke glass, and rinsed it in the sink. I took a drink of water, and then I asked, "Why didn't she leave him?"

"Agnew doesn't believe in divorce."

"Was that the only reason?"

I sensed the steeliness in the determined shake of her head. "That is one question I will not answer."

"All right. Then I'll ask another. Did your daughter murder Luke Fordham?"

"Did she?" Mrs. Queely was playing twenty questions again.

"I'm asking you."

"No, she didn't."

"How do you know?"

She asked me very quietly, "No matter *what* I know, would you really expect me to give you a different answer?"

I put the glass in the sink, walked over and stood in front of her. I felt like an inept surgeon frantically carving away at a human heart with a dull, jagged knife, and no opiate.

"What time did your daughter return home?"

She shook a sudden finger under my nose and I could see the delicate blue-laced tracery of veins on the back of her hand. "Isn't it about time you told me exactly what has happened to Luke?"

"I'm sorry," I said, irritated with myself because I was beginning to feel like a heel again. "But I'd like the answers to a few more questions first."

She dropped the hand back to her lap. "Go ahead and ask."

"What time did your daughter come home?"

"I don't see why I should answer that."

"Do you know when she came home?" I persisted.

"Yes."

"When?"

"What time was Luke murdered?"

"You answer my question first, Mrs. Queely."

She ran a finger around the rim of the gin glass and stared at me shrewdly. Finally she smiled and said, "You're a tenacious

young man. Very well. Agnew returned at nine last evening."

My eyes flicked to the wall clock. Two-seventeen. If Dr. Stamcel's pre-autopsy guess had been at all accurate—and I'd never known him to be wrong—Luke Fordham had died about nine-forty-five. Even allowing for a wide discrepancy, the time element seemed to put Agnew Fordham in the clear. Considering the time it had taken her to come home, Luke Fordham must have died almost an hour after she left him.

If she had been with him in the theatre. That fact wasn't definitely established yet, even though her purse had been in his pocket. He might have placed it there for safekeeping during dinner. And, of course, I couldn't go forgetting that Mrs. Queely was Agnew Fordham's mother—and it was her word I had to accept for the time Agnew arrived home.

I asked, "How can you be certain it was exactly nine when she came in?"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Lieutenant. I didn't say exactly. But I was listening to the radio, and she rang the bell just as the announcer was beginning the commercial for the nine o'clock program."

"Rang the bell?"

"You're not deaf—and you'll oblige me by not parroting every statement I make."

"All right, Mrs. Queely. But why was it necessary for your daughter to ring the bell? Doesn't she carry a key to her own home?"

She cocked her head, reminding me more than ever of the kindly yet imperious queen. "How coy can you get? If you've discovered Luke's body, you know very well he had my daughter's purse."

"Why?"

"Haven't you ever been on a date, Lieutenant?"

I couldn't help blushing.

She smiled serenely. "I'll bet you've tucked a lady's purse in your pocket on an occasion or two."

I nodded like a schoolboy.

"You're a gentleman, Lieutenant." I perked at the verbal pat on the head. "But if you weren't, you'd realize an angry woman who left you flat might forget her purse was in your pocket."

CHAPTER IV

HALF-HEARTED HOMICIDE



I OPENED my mouth to ask another question and felt like E. Bergen's Charlie when L. von B.'s notes chimed forth from my tonsils.

Mrs. Queely bounded from her chair and padded away. "That's the front door." She let the explanation drift over her shoulder, managing to convey the not too subtle impression that no policeman could possibly have an appreciative knowledge or understanding of life's finer music. I wondered how Ludwig would feel if he could know he had been immortalized in door chimes.

It was Kate Defer, one of the police matrons. While Mrs. Queely paced her to Agnew's boudoir, I got Mike Tinder on the phone again.

All three employees of the L-F Plumbing Supply House, Mike reported, had been sleeping the sleep of the good citizenry. All three, moreover, had expressed profound shock and regret at the news of Luke Fordham's untimely and precipitous departure—and in the next breath had inquired whether L-F would continue to function under a new management, or whether they would be forced to seek other employment. Which gave me more than a vague hint of the noble love and admiration borne for him by Luke's workers.

Mike told me, "Doc says the bruise on Fordham's temple was probably made by the heel of a woman's shoe. Found traces of street dirt and leather scrapings."

"Good deal," I said. "Kate just got here, but I haven't spoken to her yet."

"I told her to check clothing," Mike said. "The tech boys found some spattered blood spots on the back of the movie seat. Same type as the stiff's. They figure some of it might have gotten on the killer."

I cradled the phone and took another look toward the bedroom. Mrs. Queely was being shoosed out gently but firmly by Kate Defer.

When she was all the way out of the room, and Kate had clicked the door shut, Mrs. Queely stood in the hallway for the space of twenty heartbeats. Then she bore down on me, her dumpy little body aimed with regal aspect in my direction.

I ducked and found myself in the Early American living-room again; there wasn't any other visible exit, so I faced her bravely.

Mrs. Queely halted two feet in front of me and demanded: "Is my daughter under arrest?"

"No." I shook my head. "No, she isn't."

"Then what is a police matron doing with her?"

"Ordinary procedure. Mrs. Fordham is an important witness, and therefore entitled to police protection until she is capable of making a complete statement."

"Piffle! May I call my attorney?"

"Of course." I wondered where I'd find the answers to all the questions he would be certain to ask me—since I hadn't been exactly following the policeman's guide.

"And what," she asked, "shall I tell him Agnew is being charged with?"

"I haven't said I was charging her with anything."

"No? Then is it possible that I'm under suspicion?"

"You know," I said, "maybe I should have asked that before. *Did* you murder your son-in-law?"

"Uh-uh." She shook her head in a quick, emphatic negative, and an impudent grin flickered across her lips. "Though I will admit the notion entered my mind more than once."

Mrs. Queely sat down in the same chair her daughter had occupied, and I said, "I thought you were going to phone your lawyer."

"No hurry," she murmured. "Besides, don't you think it's about time I was told the how and wherefore of Luke's murder?"

Of course she had a right to know, and I had exceeded my authority by withholding the information this long—in addition to which there should have been an official identification of the body by some member of the household. But you can always stretch a rule and regulation, providing the stretch-

ing pans out without snapping back in your face. I crossed my mental fingers.

"Excuse me a moment," I said. "I'll be right back." I walked out of the living-room.

MY FINGERS drummed gently against the knob and Kate Defer opened the door of Agnew Fordham's bedroom. I could see Agnew's pale face, the left profile turned away from the pillow, her thin nostrils still pinched tightly together.

Kate stepped into the hall and I whispered, "How is she?"

"Awake," came an answering whisper.

"Find anything?" My lips were almost against her ear.

Kate shrugged her eyebrows. "Looks as though she tried to remove some kind of stain from her coat with alcohol. I've got it tucked away in case you want to send it to the lab."

"Good girl," I whispered. My lips moved almost soundlessly, but her eyes were alert. She saw, rather than heard, what I asked. "Do you think you can send her to the living-room in about a minute?"

Kate nodded.

"Let her come alone," I added.

Mrs. Queely hadn't moved from the chair, but the snap of her eyes belied the motionless patience of her dumpy little body.

"Well?" she demanded.

I cleared my throat and stood so the entrance to the living-room was visible. There was a long moment of awkward silence, and then I heard the sound of a soft footfall.

I spoke in a loud, clear voice: "There isn't any doubt at all that Luke Fordham was murdered."

Mrs. Queely snapped, "I should hope not, after all the fuss you've been making."

I could see Agnew Fordham in the living-room doorway, but I pretended an unawareness of her presence. Mrs. Queely lifted troubled eyes to her daughter—but made no other sign.

"He was killed in the Greenway Theater," I said. "Murdered. Someone stuck a knife in his neck." I felt like a butcher slaughtering cattle without benefit of a mercy blow. But it was the only way I could figure to induce shock—and I had a hunch enough

shock would tie this case into a fast, neat bundle.

Agnew Fordham gave a short gasp—though it sounded more like a moan—and Mrs. Queely bounced across the room, clucking over her daughter like a distraught mother hen. She led Agnew to a chair, put a protecting arm around her shoulder, and proceeded to tongue-lash me.

"Just where do you think you are, Lieutenant? Or is there some special medal for a police officer which rewards his ability to brow-beat women?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm sorry. Now, Mrs. Fordham, do you think you're strong enough to answer some questions?"

"No!" Mrs. Queely snapped.

"I'm afraid these questions will have to be answered," I insisted. "Here—or at the station house."

"It's all right." Agnew patted her mother's hand. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"What time did you meet your husband?"

"Exactly six-thirty."

"Exactly?"

"Yes." Her voice was strained but clear. "Mr. Fordham is—he was very insistent upon punctuality. He never liked to be kept waiting."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At the Midway House. We had a dinner engagement." I knew the spot. One of those swank places where nothing was good and the prices were high. Most people went there in the hopes of being seen by the right people, only the right people never seemed to patronize the joint.

I asked, "Did you go there directly you left home?"

"No. I did some shopping. I left the house around four o'clock."

"Did you buy anything?"

"Yes." I detected a note of puzzlement. "Several things."

"Bring them home with you?"

"No, of course not. I imagine they'll be delivered some time tomorrow. Today, that is."

"Wasn't there something you bought and carried with you?"

"No. I—" She hesitated.

Mrs. Queely broke in. "What are you try-

ing to do, Lieutenant? Can't you see my daughter is sick?"

"Mother, please." Again Agnew patted her hand.

I asked, "What did you and your husband fight about, Mrs. Fordham?"

"But we didn't—"

"I already told him you did, Agnew," Mrs. Queely said.

Agnew said, "It was not important."

"I'd like to know, anyway."

"Luke wanted to sell the business."

"And you didn't?"

"It made no difference what I wanted," she said flatly. "It was his business."

Mrs. Queely snorted. "Started and kept up with your money."

I ASKED, "Had you ever had arguments over his selling the business before?"

"Yes. That and other things."

"What other things?"

Agnew Fordham reared her head. "What right do you have asking me all these questions?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Fordham. Except that it's my job to find whoever killed your husband."

She didn't say anything.

"Of course, you've a perfect right to refuse to answer. But if you've nothing to hide, you needn't feel ashamed to tell me anything." Mrs. Queely snorted again.

I repeated my question. "What other things did you and your husband quarrel over?"

"What I told you about. Money, sometimes . . . and women." Her voice sank to a whisper. She looked a hundred years old.

"I'll tell you," Mrs. Queely said scornfully. "Luke Fordham was a swine. He married my daughter simply because she had money." She spoke as though she were indicting Luke Fordham before the courts of Hell. "He refused to have children by her. He made her account for each cent she spent. He told her what to cook, how to dress. He even tried to tell her what to think. *I wish I'd killed him years ago!*"

She broke off and I saw the tears in her eyes, and right then I felt like walking out of the place, and saying to hell with being a

cop. But I didn't. Instead she asked, "Why didn't you divorce him, Mrs. Fordham?"

"I don't believe in divorce."

It was a simple statement—as simple and as strong as the rock upon which a belief in Heaven is built.

I heard a noise in the hallway and looked around. Kate Defer was standing there and she had a smile of encouragement on her face. But I didn't know if the smile was for me or for Agnew Fordham.

I started the question game again. "What happened after you left the Midway House?"

"We went to the Greenway Theater."

"What time?"

"It was about eight—a little before."

"You didn't stay for the whole show?"

"No. I had a headache, so I came home."

"Alone?"

"Yes. There wasn't any reason why Mr. Fordham should spoil his evening."

"You came directly to this house?"

"Yes."

"What time did you get here?"

About nine. I remember hearing the start of a radio program when mother opened the door. I'd forgotten my purse—it was in Mr. Fordham's pocket." She spoke as if by rote.

"Your husband was all right when you left him?"

"Of course."

"Where were you sitting in the theater?"

"The last row in the balcony."

"Do you generally sit that far back?"

"Yes. Mr. Fordham didn't like being too close to the screen. It bothered his eyes."

"Were there many people in the balcony?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice."

"What about the last row?"

"No. I think we were the only ones there. But I'm not certain."

"Tell me, Mrs. Fordham, wasn't there *something* you bought and carried to the theater with you?"

"No. I told you I didn't."

"A knife, Mrs. Fordham?"

"No!"

"A little knife, Mrs. Fordham. A little knife—but not too little to kill your husband."

"No! No! No!" she screamed, and I felt a chill in my spine. "I told you I didn't! I

didn't carry anything with me! I didn't have a paring knife."

I said very gently, "I asked you about a knife, Mrs. Fordham. I didn't say it was a paring knife."

Mrs. Queely stared at me, tears running down her cheeks. Kate Defer went over and began to comfort the two women. I walked out to the phone. But for the first time in my life I wasn't happy about typing up a case.

I didn't go to the White Diner or to Johnny Luchow's.

I sat in a one-armed joint, drinking coffee, and staring at Mike Tender. "You did a fast job on this one," he said finally.

"Yeah. Real smart detecting."

"Hell, Ray. You've been a cop too long to let anything like this get under your skin."

"I guess you're right, Mike." I finished my coffee. "How was she taking it?"

"Not too bad." But I knew he was lying. I hadn't hung around after the boys came to Beachwood Drive. It was my job to deliver them, but I didn't have to stick around and watch the execution. Mike had found me here, drinking coffee. It's better than whisky.

Mike said, "You must have been pretty sure right off the bat?"

"Why not?" I said bitterly. "I'm a great detective."

"Stop feeling so sorry for yourself."

"Okay, Mike," I forced a laugh. "Sure I was certain. Especially when she keeled over. Didn't bat an eye when I said I was from homicide and her husband was dead. Just insisted he couldn't have been in an accident. But when I said he was murdered—over she went."

"So?" Mike asked.

"You ought to talk to Dr. Stamcel once in a while," I said. "He told me a long time ago lots of people kill without thinking of killing. They feel as if they're merely eradicating an irritating blight. Guess that's the way Mrs. Fordham felt. But when I used the word murder, it shocked her into a realization of what she'd done. Until then her mind had refused to accept the fact."

I watched a fly buzzing about and spilled a little sugar on the table.

"Yeah. I guess maybe it's so," Mike finally said. "Anyway, she didn't hold anything back. Fordham told her he was getting rid of the business and ditching her. Seems he had some young tomato stashed away. Anyway, Mrs. Fordham blew her cork in the movie. He kept needling her, and first thing you know, she took off a shoe and smacked him on the noggin. The knife was in her coat pocket. She'd bought it earlier and probably forgotten all about it. Anyway, after she conked him with the shoe, she felt the knife—and that was that. I don't guess she really knew what she was doing."

I sat there for a long time after he'd finished talking. I kept on watching the fly, watching it feed. After a while I got up.

Mike asked, "Where are you going?"

"To phone Mrs. Queely."

"What for?"


"I'm going to make damn sure she knows a good lawyer."

"Gettin' soft in your old age, Ray?"

"Maybe." And I laughed. "Stick around, Mike. I think my appetite's coming back. I want some company with my ham and eggs."


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THE LONG NIGHT



**By
PHILIP
KETCHUM**

"You wouldn't have
found a thing, Joe"

JOE PULASKI'S mother died when he was twenty-seven. Her death left a void in Joe's life which he was sure he could never fill. He had idolized his mother, had delighted in doing things for her, and had always laughed when she suggested that

he find some nice girl who would appreciate him. He didn't want any other girl. No one could take his mother's place.

Then suddenly she was gone and without her, Joe was lost, and bewildered, and frightened. She had been his haven, his source of

*There was evidence, there was a witness, but Joe's faith
in Mary Lambert's innocence made him blind to the facts!*

comfort and encouragement. She had been the person to whom he had taken his problems, and who had always listened sympathetically, and who knew how to say the right things. Now, he had no one to go to, or no one with whom to spend his evenings. No one who understood him. Other than his mother, he had never had any close friends.

For a time, then, Joe's life was difficult. His work suffered and he lost weight and grew irritable. What might have happened, eventually, he didn't know, but as things worked out, he grew interested in Mary Lambert. This interest, at first a very casual thing, developed swiftly to the point where Mary almost completely filled the space in his life which had formerly been his mother's.

Mary was a thin, frail, rather quiet girl who worked in the same office with Joe. She wasn't particularly pretty but she was neat and competent. There was always a clean, fresh look about her and she had friendly blue eyes. She didn't seem to be a happy girl, for she almost never laughed, but then Joe was a sober and serious person himself.

Mary seemed close to no one in the office. Like Joe, she lunched alone, and this apparent similarity in their habits may possibly have had something to do with drawing them together. One noon, quite by accident, Joe sat next to Mary at the lunch counter in the building and afterwards came back to the office with her. Two nights later, he walked with her to the rooming house where she lived. Within another week, this became a regular routine. He enjoyed it.

Joe didn't know he was falling in love. Mary would listen to him, just as his mother had. She made the same encouraging answers. And Joe discovered, suddenly, that she had a nice smile and that when she smiled she was pretty. In another week, they were spending their evenings together, sometimes taking long walks, sometimes sitting in the parlor at the rooming house, sometimes going to a show.

GRADUALLY Joe learned a great deal about Mary Lambert. She had come to New York from a small town in Ohio, immediately following the tragic experience

which had certainly colored her life. Her mother, an invalid, had committed suicide, but an ambitious county attorney had tried to pin the crime on Mary, intimating that she had grown tired of caring for her mother and was greedy to inherit her mother's estate. At the trial, Mary had been acquitted. With the memory of his own mother still strong in his mind, Joe could appreciate what Mary had had to endure. This story made him feel more tenderly toward her.

"I loved her, Joe," Mary told him. "I felt lost when she was gone. I still miss her."

From the sound of her voice and the look in her eyes, Joe knew she was telling the truth. He put his arm around her and held her tightly. He said, "Mary, we need each other. We've both been lost."

They decided to get married the next week, but they didn't. Three days later, at ten o'clock in the morning, two men came into the office, talked to the boss, and then to Mary. They took her away with them and within another hour, Joe heard the story of what had happened. Mrs. Selma Connors, who operated the rooming house where Mary lived, had been found in her bedroom, her head crushed by some blunt instrument. Mary had been charged with the murder. An hour later, Joe was down at police headquarters, talking to Detective Dan Hogan.

Hogan was a big man, square shouldered, tall. He had iron gray hair and a stern, rugged, scowling face. His eyes were sharp and hard.

"I'm sorry, Joe, but that's the way it is," he said flatly. "Mary Lambert killed the woman. I'd stake my reputation on it. We've more evidence than we need to prove the case. In the lining of Mary's pocketbook, which she had at the office, we found the money which was missing from the strong box in Selma Connors' room. Hidden in Mary Lambert's mattress we found the jewels which had been taken. Another roomer, Mrs. Helen Taylor, actually saw the crime committed, through the back porch window, though at the time she didn't realize what she was seeing. We found blood stains on Mary's blouse, a blouse which had been wrapped in newspaper and dropped in a waste paper receiver on the corner. What

can you say to that?"

Joe shook his head, stubbornly. "I don't believe it."

"But what I've told you is true."

"I still don't believe Mary is guilty."

"But how can you believe anything else, Joe?"

"I know Mary Lambert," Joe answered. "I know she wouldn't have done a thing like that."

His voice was shaky. He was perspiring and he was frightened. Frightened for Mary and for himself, for without Mary he would be lost again.

"Can I talk to her?" he asked.

Dan Hogan pulled in a deep breath. After a moment, he nodded.

Joe Pulaski talked to Mary that afternoon, while three police officers listened. She told him just what he expected. She hadn't killed Selma Conners. She had gone to Selma's room this morning to tell her she would be leaving in another week. There had been no trouble between them. How the money found in the lining of her purse had gotten there she didn't know. Nor did she know about the jewels found in her mattress, or the blood stained blouse.

MARY'S eyes didn't waver as she talked to Joe. She was telling the truth. Joe was convinced of it more than ever when they told him he must leave.

"It was someone else," he said to Dan Hogan. "Someone hid the money in Mary's purse, and the jewels in her mattress. Someone else stained her blouse with blood and dropped it where it would be found."

"But we have a witness to the murder," said Hogan.

Joe shook his head. "Your witness is lying."

"But why?"

"To protect the murderer."

"And who do you think killed Selma Conners?"

"I don't know," said Joe. "I don't know, right now. But I'll find out."

Joe hired an attorney for Mary Lambert that same day, and that evening, started on a course which he was to follow for months. He didn't guess it then. He didn't know

what lay ahead, but the chances are if he had known, he would have acted in no other way. Dan Hogan, time and time again would say to some man at headquarters, "I just don't get it. What is there that gives a man such faith in a woman that he's blind to facts. I've seen some funny things in my time, but nothing quite like this."

He was referring, of course, to Joe's stubborn insistence that Mary was innocent, and to Joe's belief in Mary which wasn't shaken, even during the trial. It was a conclusive trial. A bitter argument between Mary Lambert and Selma Conners was recalled by several other roomers. Though it shouldn't have been a part of the case against her, the shadow in Mary's past was brought to light by the newspapers. Once before, Mary had been charged with murder. She had been acquitted, but the acquittal was made to seem wrong. This time, at the end, it was a different story. This time, Mary Lambert was found guilty and the jury did not recommend leniency. She was sentenced to die.

"But she didn't kill Selma Conners," Joe said to Dan Hogan. "I tell you she didn't."

This was a week after the trial, and a month after Joe had quit his job. He looked seedy, though he probably didn't realize it. And he looked tired. He was thinner. There were shadows under his eyes and the skin across his face was bone tight.

"It's all over, Joe," said Dan Hogan, and he tried to make his voice kind. "You've done what you could for Mary, all any man could be expected to do for her. Why don't you go away somewhere, start all over again."

"But she's innocent," said Joe. "I can't go away. I've got to prove it."

Dan Hogan's scowl came back. He realized, suddenly, that he had put up with a lot so far as Joe was concerned. Joe had questioned all the roomers at the rooming house where Mary had lived. Several had complained to Hogan. He had warned Joe to leave them alone, and had been sure Joe would, now that the trial was over. But he wondered about that.

"What are you going to do, Joe?" he asked bluntly.

"I'm going to find the guilty party," Joe answered.

"But the case is closed."

"Not to me," said Joe. "It will never be closed to me so long as Mary is in jail."

"If you start bothering people again," Hogan promised, "you'll be in jail yourself."

Joe shrugged his shoulders. He turned and marched toward the door.

IT DIDN'T seem to Joe Pulaski that he was doing anything unusual. To him, the problem he faced could be stated quite simply. Mary Lambert had been accused and convicted of a crime of which she was innocent. Somewhere was the truth, and it was up to him to find it. Up to him because he loved Mary, and because there was no one else to continue the search for the truth.

Joe was an accountant, or rather, had been an accountant before he had quit his job. He had the trained and mathematical mind of an accountant. It was a mind which worked this way: A true column of figures added up to an exact result. If the column of figures wasn't true, the result, even though mathematically exact, couldn't be true. The conviction of Mary Lambert wasn't true because the facts which added up to her conviction ignored the kind and gentle nature of the girl, as he knew her, and as he was convinced she was. And so in his own mind, Joe threw out the conviction of the court.

But Selma Conners had been murdered. That was a fact. Someone other than Mary Lambert had killed her. That was a fact. And if those two facts were true, so were these: The person who had killed Selma Conners had stained a blouse with blood, had hidden the money in Mary's purse, and the jewels in her mattress. What he had to do was find that person.

At a far stretch of the imagination, a stranger could have committed the crime, but it seemed to Joe that the guilty person was more likely one of the three other roomers living in the rooming house, or Bill Conners, Selma's husband. So there were four on Joe's list of suspects: Bill Conners; Helen Taylor, who had testified to seeing the murder committed; Ed Morris, a photog-

rapher; and Frank McBride, who had some independent source of income and was unemployed. Joe had talked to all four of his suspects many times. He had learned considerable about them, but nothing conclusive.

One evening a week after his conversation with Hogan, Joe stood in the shelter of a tree across the street from the rooming house. The rain was coming down steadily. It had soaked through the light coat Joe was wearing. He was chilled to the bone, but hardly conscious of it. His eyes watched the shadows occasionally visible on a curtained window of the rooming house.

A man, hurrying down the street, saw him and stopped. The man said, "Joe? Joe Pulaski?"

Joe glanced around. He nodded. "Hello, Morris."

"Still at it, huh," said Morris. "Who is it tonight?"

Joe made no answer, but Morris apparently guessed the answer. "Helen Taylor, huh?" he said aloud. "And maybe she's not alone in her room. Maybe Bill Conners is with her, but what does that prove? Bill's wife is dead and if Bill's the kind of man who can go for a faded blonde, he's got one handy. It's a cold, wet night, Joe. Give it up and go home."

"I'll never give up," said Joe sharply.

Morris shrugged. He stared at Joe for a moment, then moved on across the street and entered the rooming house. He was a man of about forty, neither tall nor short. He didn't go to work until late in the morning and sometimes worked late at night. On the morning of Selma Conners' death he had still been in bed when the police arrived, summoned by Helen Taylor. Or at least, that was the story.

Joe watched Morris disappear from sight, then glanced up at the window. It was Bill Conners who was in Helen Taylor's room, and maybe it didn't prove anything, but maybe it did. If Bill Conners had been tired of his wife and had been in love with Helen Taylor—

The light in the room Joe was watching finally went out. Joe glanced at his watch. It was eleven o'clock. He turned and hur-

ried up the street to a tavern, which he had visited on many other occasions. As he had half expected, Frank McBride was there at the bar, sipping a beer and talking to two other men. Joe took a seat in a vacant booth. He gave his order and after he had been served he sat there, watching McBride. McBride, a thin man, was stoop shouldered, and had gray hair at his temples. He was a nervous, high strung man, quick tempered—a gambling man, for Joe had overheard him telephoning bookies. He also was a man who drank too much, which Joe had witnessed.

McBride suddenly turned, as though conscious he was being watched. Anger colored his face. He left the bar and marched to where Joe was sitting.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"Having a beer," said Joe mildly.

"You're lying," thundered McBride. "I won't have it, I tell you. I won't have any more of your snooping. Get out."

Joe shook his head, not quite sure what would happen next. For a moment he thought McBride might try to throw him out, but the moment passed. McBride jerked away and crossed to a phone booth. He was grinning when he walked back to the bar.

THE reason for this was apparent half an hour later when Dan Hogan came in, glanced around the room, then came immediately to the booth where Joe was sitting. The detective's scowl was heavier than usual.

"I won't permit this, Joe," said Hogan, grimly. "I can't let you go on annoying people."

"I'm only having a beer," said Joe.

"Then after tonight, buy your beer somewhere else. Quit following McBride. We checked his alibi for the morning of the murder. He's in the clear."

Joe leaned forward. "Would it interest you, Hogan, to know that Bill Connors and Helen Taylor are—"

"No it wouldn't," interrupted the detective. "Leave them alone, too, Joe. This is your last warning. Now get started for home."

A few days later Joe and Mary Lambert

were staring at each other through the wire grill in the visitors' room. Mary was twisting her hands together in her lap, Joe was clenching and unclenching his fists. Then after almost a minute of silence, they spoke.

"Hello, Mary."

"Hello, Joe."

"They're treating you all right?"

"Yes."

"I haven't found out yet who killed Selma, but I will."

"You mustn't worry about it, Joe."

"Of course I must."

"But it's so hopeless."

"It's not hopeless. Don't say things like that."

Joe was suddenly smiling and after a moment a smile came to Mary's lips. "All right," she nodded. "I won't, Joe."

"I'm going to Oklahoma," said Joe, "so I won't get to see you until I come back."

"Oklahoma?"

"Yes. Selma Connors came from Oklahoma. That was mentioned at the trial. Don't you remember?"

Mary shook her head. "What about your job?"

"I'm taking time off," Joe lied.

"You mustn't take too much time off, Joe."

"I'll be thinking of you every night."

"Every night," said Mary.

FOR three months Dan Hogan didn't have a report on Joe Pulaski, and didn't know what had happened to him. Then one morning, a thin, haggard looking man in clothing which was almost ragged showed up at headquarters, insisted on seeing him, and was shown into his office. And at first, Hogan didn't recognize the man.

"I've got it," said Joe. "I've found it. Found what I've been looking for."

There was a high note of excitement in his voice. Hogan scowled. He glanced at the calendar. It lacked ten days of the morning set for the execution of Mary Lambert. "What is it, Joe?" he asked bluntly.

"I've been to Oklahoma," said Joe.

"Yeah?"

"Selma Connors came from there, from a town called Langsdale."

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"But her name wasn't Selma Connors," Joe continued. "Her name was Selma Dennison. She was married to a man named Frank Dennison."

Hogan waited. He wondered what wild story would follow and what he should do about it. And he studied Joe Pulaski. There was an almost wild look in Joe's eyes, a crazy look. "I'll have to lock him up," Hogan told himself. "I'll have to vag him until after the execution."

"There was a bank hold-up, ten years ago," Joe was saying. "The bank hold-up was in Moreland, Kansas. The robbers got away with thirty thousand dollars. That is, the man who was carrying the money got away. The other two were killed. The man who got away for a time, was Frank Dennison. He was later caught and sentenced to prison for life. Two years ago, he escaped."

Hogan was sitting up straighter now. He had placed the name, Dennison. Such a man had escaped from prison about two years ago. The exact details he didn't recall.

"What else, Joe?" he demanded.

"The money taken in the hold-up was never recovered," said Joe. "Frank Dennison gave it to his wife. She brought it here. And he found her and killed her after making her tell him where the money was."

"You're guessing, now, Joe."

"But it was what happened. I know it's what happened."

"Selma Connors was really Selma Dennison?"

"That's right."

"And how do you know Dennison followed her here?"

Joe reached into his pocket. He drew out a picture. He was breathing fast as he leaned over and placed it on the detective's desk. "There they are, Hogan," he cried. "Frank and Selma Dennison. Look at the man closely."

Hogan did so. He came to his feet. "Frank McBride!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Frank McBride."

Here was something pretty real. Here were facts which hadn't come out at the trial. If it was true that McBride was Den-

nison, and that Selma Connors had been his wife, and that she had had the money stolen from the bank, the entire case might have to be opened again. At least, after his facts were checked, the whole problem should be put up to the governor, who at least might delay the execution.

"Joe," he said, "you stay here. Let me carry the ball for a while."

He hurried into the next room to bark out orders, then looked back into his office. Joe Pulaski's head was buried in his arms. His shoulders heaved as though he were crying. And Dan Hogan, who was a tough and hard-boiled guy, felt a sudden mist in his eyes which he quickly blinked away.

THAT was on Tuesday, and the following Tuesday, late in the afternoon, Dan Hogan faced one of the toughest interviews of his life. But Joe didn't know that as he stood at the detective's desk. He had had no warning of what to expect.

"We've got Frank Dennison," said Hogan. "We finally ran him to earth."

He had moved, dropped from sight, but each day Hogan had been promising he would be found. Joe's face lit up at the news.

"We found him and he's locked up," Hogan continued. "He'll be sent back to Kansas. It's true, Joe, that he was Selma's husband. He admitted she knew where he had hidden the bank loot, that when he looked for it, it was gone. He thinks she took it. He might, eventually, have killed her in trying to make her tell where it was. But he didn't kill her, Joe. We are positive of that. His alibi is air-tight."

"You mean—"

"I mean just that, Joe."

"Then Mary—"

"I don't know what the Governor will do. We can't assure him that the discovery of Selma's true identity has anything to do with her death. And the case against Mary—if it hadn't been that Helen Taylor saw the murder through the window, this might give us a chance. But in view of the Taylor woman's testimony—"

"There was a curtain over the window," said Joe thickly.

"I know. I tested that. You could see

figures in the room through the curtain, Joe. You could see well enough to distinguish a man from a woman."

"But what about the bank money—the money that disappeared?"

"Perhaps Selma spent it or lost it, or more likely, hid it away somewhere. The secret of what happened to it may never be known."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, Joe."

Haggard Joe Pulaski sucked in a breath. He stared at the window without seeing it. There was a ringing sound in his ears. He tried to whip his thoughts into some kind of order, but couldn't. Words struggled through his throat, croaking out into the room.

"She didn't do it, I tell you. Mary didn't kill that woman. They've got to set her free. How much time do I have?"

"Three days, Joe," said Hogan. "But maybe the Governor—let me buy you a drink."

The telephone on Hogan's desk started ringing and Hogan turned to answer it, glad of the interruption. When he looked up once more, Joe Pulaski was gone.

IT WAS a dark night. Joe stood in the shadows of the trees across from the boarding house where Mary had lived. He watched the curtained window of Helen Taylor's room. Helen, who had lied about what she had seen through the back porch window. He was back to the beginning again. Helen had lied and now Helen and the man who had been Selma's husband—

The door to the house across the street opened and a man came out. He crossed the street toward a parked car, caught sight of Joe, hesitated, then moved in Joe's direction.

"You again, Joe?" he asked curiously.

The man was Ed Morris. Joe shrugged his shoulders.

"And watching Helen's window again?" said Morris. He sounded faintly amused. "They're going to get married, you know. Helen and Bill Connors."

"She didn't do it," said Joe. "Mary did not kill Selma Connors."

"You might be right at that," said Ed

Morris slowly. "Maybe Frankie will break down and talk. That detective, Hogan, told me about what you dug up for him in Oklahoma. I've got to hand it to you, Joe. You're probably one of the most stubborn men in the country. How about running up town with me. I've got to see a man, then we'll grab a bite to eat and do a little talking."

"I want to stay here," Joe answered.

Morris turned back to his car, hesitated momentarily, then climbed into it and drove off.

Joe stood under the shadows of the tree, watching the curtained window across the street, but he was not thinking about the window or the woman beyond. Something kept nagging at his mind, something he couldn't identify for a time. But finally it came to him—stabbing through him like a knife. Ed Morris had said to him, "Maybe Frankie will break down and talk." Frankie! Morris had referred to Frank Dennison as "Frankie." No one here had ever called him by that name. Hogan had referred to him as Frank. But in Oklahoma, a sheriff Joe had talked to had used the name Frankie, and so had others.

It was a little thing, just a diminutive ending to a name, and perhaps nothing more. It was a little thing but it was still something to grasp. There was nothing else Joe could turn to. "Frankie," he said under his breath. "Frankie." He started across the street.

He knew the rooming house quite well. He knew the location of Ed Morris's room, on the lower floor. He got in through an unlocked window, drew the curtain over the window, and clicked on the lights, and stood there for a time, glancing from side to side, and suddenly excited.

"Could it have been Morris?" he was asking himself. "Could Morris have learned about the bank loot and killed Selma in an effort to make her talk? And if it had been Morris and he had found the money, couldn't it be hidden here?" There was only a thin chance that the money might be here, but Joe didn't have the time to miss any chance at all. Three days were left. Only three. He started searching the room. He started

searching and he didn't hear the noise at the door or hear the door open, but he heard it close and he jerked around to see Morris leaning against it, watching him. Joe saw the gun in Morris's hand. The gun was pointed straight at him.

"Maybe it was a good hunch that brought me back," said Morris. "But you wouldn't have found a thing, Joe. Not a thing."

"Not the money?" asked Joe.

"No."

Joe Pulaski's shoulders straightened. He knew, suddenly, that he had come to the end of his search. He knew it because of the gun in Morris's hand, and because Morris had come back to his room, and because Morris had used the name "Frankie" in referring to Frank Dennison. Here, facing him, was the man who had killed Selma Connors, and who had placed the guilt on Mary Lambert. Helen Taylor had been deceived in what she had seen through the thick curtains of the window.

"Some day," said Joe slowly, "I'll find the money. Some day you'll start spending it. I'll be right there to ask where you got it. I'll find where you came from and why you called Frank, Frankie. I'll discover the connection. I'll never stop, Morris. Never."

There was an ugly look on the face of the man who stood at the door, but he nodded his head as though in agreement. "I suppose that's true," he muttered. "I don't suppose, if you lived, that you ever would stop. But death will stop you, Joe. A man can shoot an intruder whom he surprises in the darkness of his room. The police will understand."

The gun in Morris's hand seemed to steady. There was a sudden explosion and the gun jumped and Morris reeled sideways and grabbed at his shoulder. Joe, curiously, didn't feel a thing. Then he understood why. The shot he had heard had come from the window and had struck Morris in the

shoulder and Dan Hogan was now climbing through the window. There was almost a grin on his face.

"Sure, Morris," he said grimly. "The police understand. You bet they understand."

LATER Hogan explained the developments to the Chief over the telephone.

"I guessed he had gone to the rooming house, Chief," said Hogan. "I followed him when he crossed the street and broke into Morris's room. I didn't stop him. The guy had used his head in what he dug up in Oklahoma. I thought he might be using it again, tonight. Anyhow, I wanted him to have any break he could get. He deserved it. I was right outside the window when Morris did his talking, and since we got Morris back here, he's done more talking. He knew the Dennisons in Oklahoma, saw the woman on the street here, recognized her, moved to her rooming house and went after the money. Got it too. I'll give you all the details when I get back."

"Get back from where?" asked the chief, his eyebrows raised.

"From up state. I'm taking Joe up state. I want to be there when he breaks the news to Mary Lambert. I've talked to the warden. It's all arranged. Not her release, for that's got to be done formally, but the warden's going to let us see her."

Joe Pulaski, sitting in a chair near Hogan's desk, was smiling. In his own mind he was already there with Mary, telling her that now everything would be all right.

"And another thing, Chief," said Hogan. "There's going to be a wedding and the whole damned Department is going to chip in for a gift. As fine a gift as we can buy. That's an order and if you don't issue it, I will, and I'm not getting soft, either."

Hogan sniffed and rubbed at his eyes. He looked at Joe and scowled. He said, "Come on, Joe. The car's waiting."

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She was faster. She had
drawn a flat automatic



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CHAPTER I

HELP WANTED

THE CONVERTIBLE hurtled down the slippery mountain road like a black projectile. Two miles back he had cut the headlights, trusting to his knowledge of this highway. Through a break in the clouds the moon hung like an icy dollar in the sky; pines, black and forbidding in the darkness, lined the road.

Wind tore at his hair, stung his eyes. His hands on the wheel were sweaty. In the rear view mirror he caught a flash of headlights. He flashed through the hamlet of Pinewood. The lake lay like a sheet of silver in the moonlight. Remembering the sharp turn in the road, he eased off the throttle, touching his brakes—too much speed for the turn. He fought the wheel. As the heavy car spun, it reminded him of riding the Whip in an amusement park.

He was pinned against the door, conscious that he yelled and flung his arms across his face. The lake was leaping at him. Something struck him a terrible blow in the chest.

Dazed, he lifted his head, seeing a pair of headlights flash by on the road and continue downgrade. *They missed me*, he thought. The pain deepened in his chest as he edged

away from the broken steering wheel. There was a hissing sound as cold lake water touched the motor block. The car settled deeper into the lake mire. An edge of panic touched him as he picked up a valise that had been hurled to the floorboards by the impact. Somehow he got the door open, floundered knee-deep in the oozing mud. With the valise tight against his tortured chest he staggered for a cluster of dark log buildings. He left a wet, red trail in the grass. Above him the stars were clean and sharp in the clearing California sky.

A phone booth set out in the graveled drive of a combination gas station-coffee shop caught his eye. No one was stirring at this late hour. The light in the phone booth was out. The valise he set on a small shelf beneath the phone. It spilled over when he hit it clumsily with his elbow, and the lid popped open. Crisp oblong strips of green fluttered to the floor of the booth. He made no effort to retrieve them, for the ache in his chest was sharpening to steel-pointed agony.

They'll come back and find me. I need help. He swayed dizzily as the thoughts tore through his mind. *Sam Willits! Whenever*



I'm in trouble Sam gets me out.

A quarter was the only change in his pocket. This he dropped into the proper slot and told a sleepy voice to get him San Carlos 2684-J.

In a moment the operator said, "Deposit thirty-five cents for three minutes."

He dropped the quarter back into its slot. His breathing was heavier. The green oblongs made rustling sounds as he shifted his feet. The operator again asked for thirty-five cents.

"No more change," he mumbled into the phone. "Sixteen thousand dollars, but no change." He swore softly.

Tires crunched on gravel. A spotlight settled on his half-submerged convertible. The light swung to the booth, blinding him.

"There he is," a voice said. "Good thing we doubled back."

A woman said frantically, "Get him away from that phone!"

The man in the booth said, "Operator. Reverse charges!"

He heard the rough sandpaper sound of feet on gravel. Automatically he hung up the phone. When he tried to draw a gun from beneath his wet coat, flame touched him through two holes that suddenly appeared in the phone booth door.

SAM WILLITS ran a hand over his rusty brown hair and tried to get the sleep out of his eyes. Into the phone he said, "Yes, operator. This is San Carlos two-six-eight-four-J."

"Pinewood calling," the operator said. Then he heard her tell someone to deposit thirty-five cents.

Sam's brown eyes were thoughtful as he fumbled sleepily for a cigarette on the nightstand. When he heard the operator repeat her request at the other end of the line, he switched on the bed lamp.

"Operator, does the party sound—drunk?"

"I couldn't say, sir." But something in the tone of her voice made him think she agreed.

That meant it was Joe again. Joe had probably given another bad check in some bar and they were holding him to get the

cash for the check in lieu of prosecution. He wanted Sam to drive up and get him off the hook. Joe and all his promises. The clock on Sam Willits' night stand said ten minutes past midnight.

A voice at the other end of the line mumbled something about reversing the charges. It was Joe's voice, all right. And from the odd way he spaced his words, Sam knew he was boiled.

Abruptly the connection was broken. The operator tried to restore the connection but failed. Joe had evidently passed out, Sam decided.

Sam paced the room, the unlighted cigarette dangling from his full lips. Joe could stew in his own brew. To hell with him. Then, as his eyes swung to a photo above the bar, Sam swore softly; he and Joe taken against the wall of a bombed-out house in Normandy.

After the war Sam brought Joe home to San Carlos, talking Matt Crane into giving him a job on the *Inquirer*. The most foolish thing he had done was introducing Joe to Elsa.

While waiting for the operator to report on the call, Sam dressed. He favored tweeds and still looked like college, although that was far behind him, for he was nearly thirty. His was a young face, but bitterness had cut its mark in the small lines that fanned out from his brown eyes and touched the corners of his full mouth. Not a handsome face, but interesting with its snub nose and heavy tan. There was a touch of Hollywood in the cut of his coat, the chocolate brown sports shirt.

Two years he had been away from San Carlos, grinding out publicity for a movie studio. The people who had been renting his house had moved away suddenly. It was trying to find a new tenant that had caused him to return, he told himself. But secretly he knew it was to see Elsa.

Mechanically he opened a drawer. Her photo lay where he had left it. Her eyes so very blue, her golden hair. She was so appealing—a long-legged blond elf out of the Scandinavian hills. He could almost hear that soft, gentle voice.

It wasn't right to keep the photograph of another's man's wife. It wasn't right at all.

Carefully he closed the drawer.

While he waited impatiently for the phone to ring he ran a hand over the wall. He had helped lay those bricks with his own hands. He remembered the night of the housewarming when he had intended to say, "Baby, I built this house for you."

"It's a double celebration," Matt Crane had said that night. Matt, who didn't look like a small-town newspaper editor; his black head fingered with gray, his bulldog jaw and the sharp steel of his eyes. "Joe and Elsa are going to be married."

Sam took it standing up, looking across the room crowded with his and Elsa's friends. Seeing her beside big Joe Taggart, who still looked All-American even with the soft padding that easy living had spread over his frame. As usual, Joe was very drunk.

Matt Crane had found Sam dropping nickels into a battered old slot machine in one corner of the rumpus room. One of the boys at the sheriff's office had made Sam a present of the machine when a Bert Lomax joint had been knocked over.

Matt Crane, seeing the grief on Sam's face, said, "If old man Hepplewaite found out his star reporter owned a slot machine he'd likely fire us both."

Sam nodded, but he was not thinking of old man Hepplewaite, who owned the *Inquirer*. He lived in L.A., and Matt ran the paper, the only stipulation being that the *Inquirer* would tolerate no gambling in the county. Hepplewaite was adamant on that point.

Matt had put a hand on Sam's shoulder, then walked away with his drink.

Later that evening Elsa had cornered Sam. "I wanted to tell you about Joe and me. But Joe let it slip before I could see you alone."

"Is it love for Joe?" he had asked her bitterly. She had nodded, and he said, "It used to be love for me."

"You haven't been around much lately, Sam. I thought—"

"I've been building a house."

"It was a hard choice," she told him. "I hope I'm right."

When they were married Sam turned his *Inquirer* job over to Joe Taggart and went

to Hollywood to write publicity.

THE PHONE rang finally, and the operator reported no success in raising the party in Pinewood. Sam felt anger stir in him when he hung up the phone. What a fool to come back here and put himself in the old squeeze between Joe and Elsa. Only once more he would help Joe, he decided suddenly. Then he would leave town, this time for good.

He had not seen Joe since he had been back. He had called Matt Crane and his ex-boss seemed evasive when Sam asked about Joe and Elsa. But Matt wanted to get together for drinks and dinner.

Pinewood was a two-hour drive up the mountain. You wouldn't know it was a town unless you saw the small metal sign at the city limits, punctured by bullet holes made by shot-happy hunters returning from the deer country. All lights in the hamlet were out.

He pulled his coupe beside a phone booth. A vague alarm touched him when his headlights picked out a convertible that was nosed into the lake. Snatching up a flashlight from the glove compartment, he sprang from the coupe. He flicked on the light and as he was passing the dark phone booth, the beam momentarily brushed against the interior. He stopped, shocked. He saw a mass of black hair and a white shirt stained red. A ruined face. Joe's face.

He felt a prickle at the back of his neck as he tried to force open the phone-booth door. But Joe's big body was wedged tight against it. Sam was conscious that his face was moist, cooling in the chill wind that blew off the lake.

His light fell on two crumpled oblongs of green paper, ground into the mud. He picked them up. They were hundred-dollar bills. He looked again at Joe, his throat tight.

A bright spot of color at the far side of the booth caught his eye. Automatically he walked over and picked it up. It was a scarf. Embroidered on one end were the initials E.L. He suddenly felt a chill. Could those initials stand for Elsa Lustrum? That was her maiden name. He put the scarf into his coat pocket, a burgeoning horror in him.

The bills he stuffed into his shirt pocket.

A coupe was the emblem of the sheriff's office on the door swung into the drive. A big man wearing a flat-crowned hat stepped out of the car. He played his light over the phone booth, then over Sam.

He said gruffly, drawing his gun, "Step over to the car. Keep your hands in sight."

Sam followed him to the prowl car. Keeping his gun on Sam, the deputy picked up a hand mike from the dashboard and talked to the dispatcher at the sheriff's office down in San Carlos. "Joe Taggart's dead. Shot. Better get hold of Matt Crane and tell him his favorite reporter finally got it."

Sam wondered at the sarcasm in Dale Bascomb's voice. The officer cut the mike switch, stepped out of the car.

"Let's hear your story," Bascomb said suspiciously.

Sam recounted the business with the interrupted phone call; how he had driven up here to look for Joe.

"We can check that easy enough with the phone company," Dale Bascomb said. He reached over suddenly and grabbed the end of the scarf that dangled from Sam's coat pocket.

"You always wear these things?" Bascomb said sarcastically. "To keep your hair down maybe?"

"I was out with a girl." Sam was sure the deputy could hear the thump-thump of his heart.

Bascomb's face was inscrutable in the darkness. He was staring at the initials. "What was the girl's name?"

"Emily. I didn't get her last name."

The big deputy grinned sourly. "Just a pickup?"

A truck rolled into the driveway. Dale Bascomb was young and tough and efficient. He glared at the short and powerfully built man who swung down from the truck.

BERT LOMAX looked almost as wide as the front end of his truck. He wore a slouch hat and laced boots and waist overalls. No gambler tags for Lomax, no Cad, no fancy suits. But whatever smelled of racket in the mountains would be touched by his thick fingers.

When he saw Sam Willits standing in the glare of the prowl car headlights, Lomax stepped forward. "Hello, Willits," he said in his gruff voice, and put out his hand. When Sam made no effort to shake hands, the gambler said, "You're not working for the *Inquirer* now. No reason we can't be friends."

Bascomb had been watching them with his inquisitive eyes. He said, "So you're Sam Willits," he said, giving Sam a new appraisal. "I've heard about you. You and Joe Taggart used to be friends. Before Taggart married your girl and took over your job—"

Sam said coldly, "You've got rookie stamped all over you, Bascomb. Don't make it so obvious." His shoulders under the tweed jacket stiffened. "I didn't shoot Joe Taggart."

The deputy's face had begun to redden, but it was Bert Lomax who uttered a sound of surprise. Evidently seeing the body in the phone booth for the first time, Lomax whistled softly. "I'll be damned! Joe Taggart with a hole in the middle of his forehead."

Bascomb said, when Lomax started forward for a closer look, "Keep away from that booth. I want a good look at those footprints." He glared at Sam. "If there's any left after Willits got through prowling around."

Bert Lomax pointed at half a dozen indentations in the soft ground beside the phone booth. "Looks like a dame might have put that bullet in Taggart. High-heeled shoes made them tracks."

The deputy said, "Get in your truck and roll, Lomax. I'll take care of everything."

The gambler shrugged heavy shoulders. To Sam, he said, "Good luck, Willits—looks like you're going to need it."

The gambler swung his big body into the truck, gunned the motor and disappeared up the road into the pines. . . .

Sam was driven to Bascomb's office, a small log building at the edge of exclusive Lakeview, five miles up the road, where L.A. and Hollywood spenders thronged for summer sun and winter skiing. No cars were parked around the expensive Swiss Chalet-type mountain cabins, for it was be-

tween seasons.

Bascomb put Sam into a chair where he could watch him, and got busy on the phone. When the deputy had finished, Sam pointed to a photo on the wall: a man with heavy jowls in a deputy's uniform. His name was Baldy Jefferson and he had been the only law on this mountains beat for fifteen years.

"How come you've got Baldy's job?" Sam asked the deputy.

"Baldy retired. Bad heart." A tight smile touched Bascomb's lips. "A lot of people," he added pointedly, "were sorry to see Baldy go."

"And they send a rookie like you to take his place," Sam grunted. "To cope with a man like Bert Lomax."

"If Lomax steps over the line, I'll button him up for good."

"I thought gambling was illegal in this state," Sam went on. "What are you doing about Lomax?"

The deputy's bronzed cheeks darkened. "It's none of your business, Willits. But just for the hell of it, I'll tell you. There isn't a game or a slot machine in these mountains. I've seen to that personally."

"Bert Lomax has a pipeline into the political sewer of San Carlos," Sam mused. "Even the *Inquirer* hasn't been able to touch him—and Matt Crane has tried."

THE CORONER had come for Joe Taggart's body, and a wrecking crew had started to pull the convertible from the lake. Before Bascomb had brought Sam up to this lonely sheriff's substation the deputy had tried to find witnesses, for a half dozen of Pinewood's citizens had come down from their cabins, attracted by the commotion of removing Taggart's body from the phone booth and the rasp of the winch pulling the wrecked car to dry land.

A gray-haired old man who lived behind the gas station had been the only one to hear the shots that killed Taggart.

"Figured it was more of them damned deer hunters," the old man snapped. "They been usin' Pinewood for target practice long enough. Last year they killed a goat I had staked out in the yard. This year they shot up my mail box. Somethin' ought to be done

about that."

It was the second day of the deer season, and as dawn lighted the sky Sam watched a dozen or more cars pass the substation, filled with hunters bent on making a kill.

Sheriff Luke Westover drove up from San Carlos with Matt Crane. The sheriff shook hands with Sam, sorry to hear about Joe Taggart. Westover was a politician's sheriff; he had held his job for more years than Sam could remember.

Matt Crane removed his battered hat. His hair looked grayer, his bulldog chin a little more determined. In this pose he always reminded Sam of the Hollywood version of a fighting editor.

When the sheriff and Matt had listened to Bascomb's report, they conversed in low tones for several minutes. From the hostile light in Bascomb's eyes it was evident to Sam that there was no love lost between the deputy and his boss.

Matt Crane called Sam outside into the chill dawn. "I'm sorry to think that one of my boys got himself shot up," Matt said. "I always liked Joe, in spite of his shortcomings."

Sam watched the editor's face, remembering that Matt had given him his first job; had patiently taught him the news game back before the war.

"Here's the way it is, Sam," Matt Crane said quietly. "Somebody came by and saw that phone booth and decided to use it for a target. The light was out in the booth and they didn't know Joe was inside—"

Sam said, "What about Lomax just happening by? Seems like he was very handy."

Matt Crane thumbed his sturdy jaw. "You're playing cops and robbers, Sam."

"Lomax has hated your guts for years, Matt. You've tried to run him out often enough." Sam caught Matt's coat sleeve. "Could Joe have stumbled onto a story up here and—"

"I hate to tell you this," Matt Crane said, "but Joe's been hitting the bottle again. I told him to take two weeks off and come up here and get it out of his system." Matt's steel-gray eyes were hard against Sam's face. "Either that, or he was through on the paper."

Sam thought that over with a frown. "But why would he try to phone me?"

"To borrow money. Wasn't he always putting the lug on you? You're back in San Carlos for the first time in two years. When he's drunk you're the first person he thinks of."

"I don't know, Matt—"

Matt Crane put a blunt hand on Sam's shoulder. "It was accidental death, Sam. The sheriff sees it that way. Let it go at that."

Sam tried to stir up some regret at Joe's passing, but found none.

Matt Crane said, "Joe was a no-good heel. Two weeks ago he slapped Elsa in front of fifty people at the San Carlos Hotel."

"Joe wouldn't do that. Not to Elsa."

"She was going to divorce him. I hear she's been staying up here at Pinewood." Matt Crane stared off through the pines. "Maybe you ought to be the one to tell her about Joe."

When Matt Crane had left with the sheriff, Bascomb said dryly, "They figure Joe Taggart was the victim of a drunken deer hunter who used a phone booth for a clay pigeon."

"Joe Taggart was murdered," Sam said, staring at the purple haze that stretched across San Carlos Valley five thousand feet below.

"That sounds funny, coming from you," the deputy said.

Sam Willits' jaw tightened. "You can say it plainer than that."

"I've got a hunch Matt Crane is trying to get you off the hook. He's sold the sheriff that story to cover for you. With Crane's political pull he may make it stick."

Sam studied the deputy a moment. "The sheriff's office has got new blood since I left. Some clean blood, for a change."

"And come election, we'll have a new sheriff." Bascomb added pointedly, "I'm going to get the party that killed Joe Taggart, man or woman!"



IT WOULD be hard to tell a girl you had loved for so many years that somebody had shot her husband to death. Especially when the three of you had once been so close.

He found her cabin from a crude map the clerk in the Pinewood general store had drawn. Those very blue eyes were red and he knew she had been crying.

"I heard it over the radio, Sam," she said, putting a knuckle against her teeth.

He sat on the edge of a sofa, staring at a worn place in the rug, aware of her nearness. She paced the small room, pausing now and then to stare out the window at the pines that stepped their way down the mountainside.

"You never wrote to us, Sam. Why not?"

"Things dead are better left dead," he said, watching her squared shoulders. Her yellow hair was pulled back severely from her high forehead and tied at the back of her neck with a red ribbon. She looked thinner than he had remembered.

She looked down at her clenched hands. "Why did you come back, Sam?"

"To rent my house." He said it harshly and saw her wince.

"I thought maybe it was because you had heard Joe and I—"

He felt a ruthlessness in him that was uncommon. He wanted to hurt her, for she had hurt him. "I brought you a scarf back from France. It was red and yellow. I had your initials stitched on the hem."

"I remember, Sam." She looked at him out of puzzled blue eyes.

"Have you worn it recently?"

She frowned, her fine light brows lifting in perplexity. "It's home in San Carlos. I'm sure of it. Why, Sam?"

"It was lying beside the phone booth where they—they found Joe."

Silence thickened in the small cabin.

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Her mouth paled. "You think I—" Her voice rose and there was growing terror in her eyes. "You think I killed Joe because he wouldn't give me a divorce?"

He rose from the sofa, gripping her by the shoulders. She tried to pull away from him, but he held her close.

"Elsa," he whispered, finding his wish to hurt her suddenly gone. "You couldn't kill anyone." Her yellow hair was soft against his cheek. "But somebody else might think differently," he added.

"What do you mean?" she asked in a dead voice.

He told her everything that had happened. When he had finished, she looked shaken.

"Somebody wants the police to think you killed him," he said. "The scarf was a plant."

For a long moment she stared at him. "I didn't bring the scarf here with me. I'm sure of it. But Joe might have had it."

"How do you mean?"

"He came up here two days ago with a suitcase full of my clothes. He wanted me to forget about the divorce and go on a second honeymoon to San Francisco." She trembled. "I wouldn't go with him. Not after seeing him with that red-headed woman. Not after everything else that happened between us these past months."

"You knew that Matt sent Joe up here to get hold of himself? It was either that or be fired off the *Inquirer*."

She nodded her yellow hair. "I saw Joe yesterday, with that redhead. They were laughing together. But it didn't anger me, seeing them, because everything I felt for Joe was dead."

"Who was the woman?" he asked, interest quickening in him.

She shrugged.

"I've seen her in San Carlos, but I don't know her name."

He thumbed her chin, lifting her white face. "I'll find who killed him, baby."

She clutched his arms. "I'm sorry he's dead, Sam. But somehow I just can't cry anymore."

He tried to smile, but it stiffened into a grimace on his face.

HE SPENT the better part of the morning prowling around Lakeview. He talked to several tavern owners who were getting their places fixed up for the winter ski crowd. When he tried to get a line on Bert Lomax, they buttoned up, but he did learn that a red-headed woman by the name of Allie Kemp owned the Arrow Club. When he stopped by the big rambling log building that housed the club he found the place closed. A sign on the door said it would be open at two P.M.

When he drove down the mountain to Pinewood he found that a crowd of curiosity seekers had come up from San Carlos to mill around the gas station. He had parked his car and was standing beside the phone booth that had been partially dismantled for the removal of Joe Taggart's body, when a murmur swept through the crowd.

He saw Elsa, bundled up in a long gray tweed coat, just entering the coffee shop. She had been recognized, he knew, because her picture was on the front page of the *Inquirer* along with a black-bordered obit for Joe Taggart.

Matt Crane had editorialized in the noon edition, calling upon the State Legislature to pass stiffer laws to control hunters who used public or private property for target practice. If that was done, Matt Crane had gone on to say, tragic accidents such as the one that had claimed the life of the *Inquirer's* reporter might be avoided in the future.

Sam pushed his way through the crowd around the coffee shop. They were staring through the windows at Elsa. He shut the door in their faces and slid onto a stool next to her. She gave him a wan smile, and then the smile faded.

"She had nerve enough to come to the cabin after you left and offer her sympathy," Elsa said.

"Who?"

"The red-haired woman."

Sam gave her a puzzled stare. "I found out who she is. Her name is Allie Kemp, and she runs the Arrow Club. Does that ring a bell?"

She shook her yellow head. The waitress brought coffee, and tried to hang around and eavesdrop, but Sam waved her away.

Elsa had turned on the stool. She gripped Sam's arm. "There she is."

Sam's eyes followed her pointing finger, seeing a red-haired woman in the seat of a small English sports car, pulled in front of a gas pump at the filling station next door. There was something sensuous in the way she smiled at the lank attendant when she paid him for the gas.

Sam rose off the seat, but before he could reach the door she had gunned the small car across the drive and down the San Carlos road.

"Don't bother with her," Elsa said tiredly, when Sam had taken his seat beside her.

"She's mixed up in it someplace," Sam grumbled. "I'll bet money on it."

Elsa shook her head. "If somebody killed Joe it was over the outside business he was mixed up in."

Sam's brows lifted. "Outside business?"

"He didn't make enough money on the *Inquirer* to buy this." She had opened her snakeskin bag. She took out a diamond ring. "Four thousand dollars it cost Joe."

Sam felt a ripple along his spine. "It must be glass."

"It's the real thing, all right. Joe showed me the bill. He brought it with him when he tried to get me to go away to San Francisco with him. When I refused, he threw it at me and walked out of the cabin."

"Funny, Joe wanting you to forget the divorce while he was still playing around with this Allie Kemp."

"That's the way Joe was." Her shoulders squared. "It was over between us a long time ago."

"Since the night he humiliated you at the San Carlos Hotel?"

She involuntarily lifted a hand to her cheek as if still feeling the sting of Joe's fingers. "You know about that?"

"Matt told me."

She put her cold fingers on his wrist. "I married Joe because I felt sorry for him. I know it now."

"You're not the first woman who tried to reform a man."

face. Under his olive drab arm he carried a bundle wrapped in newspaper.

Something about the intent set of the deputy's features made Sam stiffen.

Bascomb said, "I'm figuring that maybe the *E* on that scarf you found doesn't stand for Emily. It might stand for Elsa. Elsa Lustrum Taggart."

"Wait a minute," Sam said roughly, rising from the stool.

"You picked something up from the ground just a minute before I drove up last night," the deputy went on. "I didn't say anything about it then, but it could have been that scarf."

Sam fished out the two muddied hundred-dollar bills from his pocket, laid them on the counter. "That's what I found. Not the scarf."

The deputy stared at them a moment, then whisked them into his pocket. "There's a charge for withholding evidence. An old newspaperman like yourself should know that." An edge of sarcasm appeared in his voice, as he added, "Or maybe Matt Crane didn't train you right."

Elsa's lips were trembling as the deputy unwrapped the bundle to reveal a pair of mud-stained high-heeled navy pumps.

"I took the liberty of searching your cabin, Mrs. Taggart," the deputy said evenly. "These shoes were in your closet."

Sam felt his pulse quicken, "Don't say a thing, Elsa. Not until you get an attorney."

The deputy's bronzed face tightened. "You must figure her guilty too, Willits, with this talk about an attorney." The deputy waved a hand at Sam's shouted protest, and took an eight-by-ten photo from an envelope. It showed the phone booth and Joe's body. Beside the booth were several white objects, and the deputy pointed at these. "Plaster casts of footprints. Your shoes fit them perfectly, Mrs. Taggart. There's a slight imperfection on the heel of the right shoe. It shows up in the casts."

Elsa had risen from the stool, her hands clenched at her sides. "I never wore those shoes in the mud—"

Sam stepped between the trembling girl and the big deputy. "I'll have your badge if you try and frame her," he said savagely.

DALE BASCOMB entered the coffee shop, his inquisitive eyes on Elsa's pale

CHAPTER III

EYE-WITNESS

"Things are different around here now, Willits," the deputy said, visibly fighting his anger. "Nobody's going to get my badge for doing my job." He wrapped up the shoes in the newspaper. "You'd better come down to San Carlos with me, Mrs. Taggart."

THE *Inquirer* was the only potent voice in a town of 35,000, but even Matt Crane could not arrange to have Elsa released on bail.

In the familiar confusion of copy-paper and telephones, Matt Crane said, "They'd have gone for the accidental death story, Sam. But you and this Bascomb had to keep digging."

Anger darkened Sam's cheeks. "I wouldn't help pin this mess on Elsa. You know better than that."

Matt Crane came around the desk. "Autopsy shows Joe was killed by two thirty-thirty slugs, probably from a deer gun. Everything would have been all right if you'd let it alone."

"No jury will believe Elsa used a deer rifle on her husband."

"A jury's liable to believe that Elsa got tired of Joe slapping her and playing around. She saw him in the phone booth last night and let him have it. She knew it would be a nasty mess trying to divorce him—"

"I never thought you'd help build a frame for her."

Matt Crane's bulldog jaw set sternly. "You've got to look at this thing logically. I'm trying to help you kids." Matt pushed him back into a chair. "Now sit down while I call the sheriff and make one last attempt to spring her."

While Matt was busy on the phone, Sam smoked and stared at the familiar portrait of old man Hepplewaite; a gaunt face and gray beard, a man who hated gambling because his father had once lost the *Inquirer* in a dice game. It had taken Mark Hepplewaite twenty years to earn enough money to buy it back.

Matt Crane hung up the phone. His face was grim. "Elsa's in for good, Sam. Unless we can figure some way to get her out."

"I'll figure a way," Sam said, his voice tense.



AT THE JAIL they let him see Elsa in the attorney's room. Even in a blue uniform with most of the blue washed out of it she still looked beautiful.

"Have they been rough on you, baby?"

"Matt told them to go easy." He recoiled at the raw fear in her eyes.

"Somebody planted those shoes in your cabin," he said. "Could Allie Kemp have done it?"

"She had no chance. We talked in the yard—" Her eyes suddenly widened against his tense face.

"And while you talked outside, somebody sneaked in and planted those shoes, then tipped off Bascomb to search your cabin." He swore softly. "That redhead is working with somebody else."

"Joe had that suitcase full of my clothes," she said hopefully. "Maybe he brought the shoes. They could have been found in the car—"

"Chin up, baby," he told her gravely. "Everything is going to work out."

From a pay phone he called Matt Crane, told him about the shoes and how they could have been found by the murderer in Joe's wrecked car. The killer could have made those footprints by the booth with Elsa's shoes, and planted the scarf.

Matt Crane's sharp voice cut him off. "Bascomb dug up a witness who saw Elsa walking through Pinewood just a little before the time they figure Joe was killed. He caught her full in his headlights and he's identified her."

Sam gripped the phone tighter, feeling as if someone had kicked him in the stomach. "Who was it, Matt?"

"Hank Trimble. He was on his bread route when he spotted her." Matt Crane added, "Stay out of it, Sam."

Sam's brain was racing. He remembered Trimble, a lank, mustached man who had

delivered bread to the mountain communities for years. Unless Trimble had changed his habits he would be shooting pool at Delmar's place until he went home to bed before starting his nightly run to the mountains.

"Trimble was mistaken, Matt," Sam said tiredly.

"Don't gum it up for her any more than you have," Matt Crane's voice said into the receiver. "It's just possible she did kill Joe—"

Sam hung up on him.

Delmar's place was as smoky and evil-smelling as Luke Delmar's ever-present cigar. When Sam asked him about Hank Trimble, Delmar swore.

"Trimble don't come in no more," Delmar snapped, and waved a plump hand at the big room, empty except for two men shooting a game of snooker at one of the tables that flanked the bar. "Nobody comes in no more. Now clear out, Willits. Nobody from the *Inquirer* is welcome here."

"I'm not with the *Inquirer* now." Sam stared at Delmar's greasy apron, at the cowboy hat he always wore. "What's happened to business?"

Delmar's dark face tightened. "For twenty years I run a few slots in the back room. One morning I wake up and Matt Crane has my picture on the front page. I'm a menace to the morals of this fair city, Crane says. So the cops take an ax to my machines."

"Matt doesn't own the paper. He takes orders from old man Hepplewaite."

Luke Delmar bit down viciously on his cigar. "They were building a fire under Matt Crane. So Matt moves the fire over under me."

"I don't get you, Luke."

"In my bloodshot eye you don't get me. Next month there's a sheriff election. The old crowd is on the run. Matt Crane with 'em."

"Any idea where I can find Hank Trimble?"

Sam had started for the door. One of the snooker players, a lank kid in a sweat-stained hat, said, "If you're looking for Trimble, you'll find him in jail. I hear they pinched him."

Outside, Sam called the jail. The booking

office informed him that a Henry Trimble was being held in protective custody.

AT THE *Inquirer* office, Matt Crane made a tent of his stubby fingers. "Sure, Luke Delmar hates me, Sam."

"Why?"

"I laid off boys like Delmar because I figured a few slots down by the railroad yards wouldn't hurt anybody."

"And you risked the wrath of old man Hepplewaite to do it," Sam said, frowning. "Why did you close Delmar up?"

Matt Crane shook his head. "You're playing cops and robbers again."

"I want a straight answer, Matt."

The editor's eyes got those steel points in them. "Old man Hepplewaite's nephew came through here with another kid. Don't ask me how they happened to wind up in Delmar's joint. When they got back to L.A. the nephew let it slip about the slot machines. Matt lifted his hands, let them fall. "Hepplewaite got me on the phone and I either had to make an example of Luke Delmar or get fired. It was as simple as that."

Sam put a hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, Matt. I don't seem to be able to think straight."

Matt Crane looked at him soberly. "Bascomb found out that Elsa was wearing a long tweed coat last night when she went walking."

"What are you getting at, Matt?"

"A person could conceal a deer rifle under a coat like that."

"You don't believe that, Matt."

"No. But Bascomb believes it."

Sam pounded a fist into the palm of his hand. "Joe was up to his ears in some racket. I'm going to find out what it is."

"Let the law take its course. Stay out of it."

"That's like asking me to forget to breathe." At the door Sam turned. "You never had a girl, Matt. You don't know what it's like."

"No?" Matt Crane said very quietly.

Sam stared at the editor, puzzled by the odd note in the editor's voice. Then he stepped outside and made his way to the jail.

ELSA folded her arms across the front of her faded blue uniform. "I—I didn't realize, Sam. I should have told Bascomb I was out walking last night."

Sam felt an ache in him as he saw the sharp terror in her eyes. "A man named Hank Trimble saw you."

"I remember seeing the bread truck. But I didn't think anything about it then. I couldn't sleep, and I was trying to clear my mind of Joe. That's why I went walking. You've got to believe me."

He put a finger under the warm angle of her chin. "Joe was getting money. Where was he getting it?"

"He never told me."

"I want to have a look around your house, Elsa."

She told him where she kept an extra key under a potted cactus in the patio.

As Sam was leaving the jail he met Dale Bascomb on the steps.

The young deputy's face was tight with anger. "I'm warning you, Willits," he snapped. "Nobody's going to pull me off this case, you or Matt Crane or anybody."

"You haven't got a case."

"Next month we'll have a new sheriff," Bascomb said through his teeth. "This is one time people won't vote the way the *Inquirer* tells them. . . ."

The house was new, rambling, with shiny windows and lots of glass brick. No reporter on the *Inquirer* could afford a place like that. He found the key where Elsa said it would be and let himself into the house. He started to Joe's bedroom. Joe's picture smiled from the wall—the same crooked grin, the bright eyes.

"I could have forgiven a lot, Joe," Sam said to the photo. "But when you put your hand to Elsa—"

He searched drawers filled with silk underwear, monogrammed shirts. He pawed through closets. Behind the dressing table in Elsa's room he found a crumpled piece of paper. When he smoothed it out, he was conscious of the thumping of his heart.

Joe: I've had enough. Either you give me a divorce or —

That was all, as if Elsa had started to pen

a note, then had changed her mind. He shoved the paper into his pocket. His hands were sweaty. What if Bascomb had found this first?

It was an hour later, after going through the living-room, that he found the letter. It bore the letterhead of the Ajax Amusement Company, Las Vegas. It was signed by a man named Riordan. Riordan, Sam recalled, was a big wheel in the Nevada city.

. . . If the equipment you speak of stands up to my personal inspection I'll buy it for my new club. The agreed price of sixteen thousand dollars will—

Sam sensed rather than heard another presence in the room. He turned, and something struck him, hard, in the center of the forehead.

CHAPTER IV

WATERED PLANTS



HE WOKE with a flashlight in his eyes. A switch engine chugged past, spraying wet steam over his face. He rose, feeling pain in his ribs. One of Sheriff Westover's deputies held the flashlight. Faces ringed the

spot in the alley where Sam had been lying.

Luke Delmar, chewing his cigar, said to the deputy, "Willits come into my place stinking drunk. He picked a fight with two stiff and they took him outside and cleaned him."

"You're a damned liar," Sam said. His tongue was raw as it rubbed across the point of a broken tooth. He saw that somebody had parked his coupe in the street at the side of Delmar's joint.

They took him to the hospital, where a doctor put stinging pain on his cuts.

Matt Crane came to the hospital, shaking his head worriedly. "What happened, Sam? Don't tell me you're going to wind up like Joe."

"I wasn't drunk, Matt." His mouth hurt when he talked. "I was at Elsa's place. Somebody jumped me."

Matt Crane said, his steel sharp eyes drilling into Sam's face, "They've really hung it on Elsa now."

Sam was putting on his coat. "What happened, Matt?"

"Bascomb got hold of a note Elsa had started to write and then evidently thrown away. It shows she might have contemplated killing Joe. That makes first-degree murder out of it now."

"The other letter, Matt? What happened to that?"

Matt Crane's eyes were puzzled. "What other letter?"

Sam started wearily for the door. Matt Crane trailed him outside.

"Joe was in some sort of gambling setup, Matt," Sam told his ex-boss. He recounted finding the letter from the man named Riordan. "Whoever hit me over the head sent Elsa's note to Bascomb and destroyed the letter."

Matt nodded soberly. "I think you've hit the truth."

Angrily Sam grabbed Matt by the coat lapels. "What's been going on in this stinking town since I left?"

Matt Crane pulled free of Sam's grasp. "We'll get Elsa a lawyer. I'll dig one up." He jerked his head. "You need some coffee."

They went to an all-night diner. Sam's face ached. There was blood across the front of his torn shirt.

Over his coffee, Sam said, "Allie Kemp's in this deal somewhere." He looked Matt Crane in the eye. "When I worked for the *Inquirer* I never got up to Lakeview."

"Why worry about that?" Matt asked as he measured sugar into his coffee cup.

Sam's mouth was a bitter line. "You kept me in town, Matt. You handled the mountain territory yourself."

Very quietly Matt Crane said, "Are you trying to make something out of that, Sam?"

"Why wouldn't you let me cover Lakeview and Pinewood? It was off-limits to everybody on the *Inquirer* but you."

Matt Crane sighed. "I wanted to handle the mountains myself. Bert Lomax is a tough boy. I didn't want you to get hurt. That's all."

Sam stared through the lunchroom window at the winking red and green lights of a caboose.

Matt Crane was saying, "I'm damned sorry you had to come back to this, Sam."

Sam burned his bruised lips on the coffee. "It's still Bert Lomax and that Allie Kemp. They're mixed up in Joe's death, and I'm going to find out why and how."

Matt Crane stirred his coffee. "I'll back you in anything; you know that." He glanced at a clock on the lunchroom wall. "You can be at Lakeview by ten o'clock. Allie Kemp ought to have her Arrow Club still open by that time. I'll look around down here."

Sam rose off the stool, feeling the tremble in his knees. "Don't tell Bascomb where I've gone."

"I won't, Sam. You can bet on that."

Sam stepped outside. He looked back, seeing that black head with its fingers of gray, the bulldog jaw. He knew suddenly how deeply Matt Crane felt about all of this.

SAM SAW his own almost unrecognizable face in the back-bar mirror of Delmar's place. At sight of him, Delmar shifted his cigar. The place was empty except for half a dozen pool players.

"I called you a liar, Luke," Sam Willits said. "You didn't fight me or cuss me. You couldn't because it was the truth."

The men at the pool tables glanced up, their faces shaded by the low-hung lights.

A drop of sweat broke across Delmar's forehead. "Get out, Sam," he warned.

"Not until I've got some answers."

"You can't beat it out of me," Luke Delmar said tiredly, and picked up a .45 from behind the bar, holding it low so the pool players couldn't see it.

"I've got a wife, Sam, and two kids," Delmar went on, his voice tight. "Maybe you think it's funny a guy like me having a nice family. But I got one. They're healthy and I want 'em to stay like that."

Sam raised his eyes from the gun to Luke Delmar's sweaty face. "It was Bert Lomax who put the heat on you to tell that story about me being in a drunken brawl."

"Like I said," Delmar snapped, "I got a

family." He cocked the gun. "They come first."

Sam's coupe was still beside Delmar's place where his attacker had left it. He drove by the jail, lifting a hand to the lighted windows of the women's section. Aloud he said, "I'll be back with the goods, baby, or else I'll never be back."

At his house he got a rifle Matt Crane had given him the second year Sam had worked for the *Inquirer*. They had gone hunting together that year, and every year after until Joe had married Elsa. . . .

It had started to rain as he began the long climb up through the mountains. His headlights picked out the slick winding road through the pines. He snapped on the car radio and picked up the San Carlos station, and a band playing *I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby*.

He remembered dancing with Elsa, the nights on the *Inquirer*, the days building the house. He had never told her what the house was going to mean. But then it was Joe taking Elsa to the dances at the hotel. It had gone on from there.

The pines thinned at the summit, replaced by rock. As he started down the long, steep grade he remembered that the road fell away a thousand feet to his right.

He drove more slowly. The music had stopped, replaced by a newscaster's unctuous voice, then the local news searing his brain.

"According to reliable sources, the grand jury now in emergency session is expected to vote a murder indictment against Mrs. Elsa Taggart—"

He snapped off the radio, feeling a sudden chill across his shoulders.

A powerful motor throbbing at his left made him turn his head. He saw a truck without lights swing close. Too close. Sam yelled a warning. A crunching jar against his left front fender knocked the steering wheel from his hands.

The light coupe shuddered at the impact. It plunged off the road, on target for a rocky creek-bed a thousand black feet below. Another terrible jar. As if ripped by a giant's hands, the door snapped open. He felt cool moist earth against his face. He

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lay still, unable to move. From far below a great crashing of metal came to his ears.

Dazed, he found he could sit up. He got to his feet. Panic drained from him, leaving a deep anger. When his eyes became adjusted to the darkness he saw he was on a narrow shelf of rock. He could feel the deep indentation where the nose of his coupe had struck the shelf head-on. The shelf led upward. He climbed, the rain gentle against his face.

When he reached the road, he saw a light and staggered that way, his feet dragging in the mud of the soft shoulder. By the time he could read *Arrow Club* in flashing neon, the fuzz was gone from his brain.

He stamped up the steps of the one-story log building. There were no cars in the parking lot. Through a window he could see that a red-headed woman, beautifully built, was playing solitaire at the bar. No one else seemed to be around.

When he entered she looked up from her cards, her greenish eyes showing surprise. "What happened to you?"

She was staring at his battered face, at his muddied and torn clothes. Sam said, "All I want is a phone, Miss Kemp."

She started for a door at one end of the bar. There was a sensuousness about her, in her eyes, in the way her red hair lay like gleaming bronze against the back of her neck. At the door, she said, "The phone is back here—Sam."

He felt surprise. "So you know me."

She shrugged and he followed her into a big empty room.

He put his right hand in his coat pocket, bunching it. "I've got a gun here, Miss Kemp. Somebody tried to kill me tonight. That has changed a lot of things."

She lifted her eyes from the bulge in his coat pocket. "Don't shoot me, Sam." There was a trace of mockery in her voice.

HE GESTURED with his free hand at the empty room. "What happened to the card tables and the roulette wheels?"

"You must be mistaken," she said, a cold smile on her lips. "This room is used for dancing."

She led the way into a small office. She

sat on the edge of a desk. "I used to see you in town, Sam. With that blonde—the one who's in all the trouble."

"The one you kept outside while somebody planted a muddy pair of shoes in her cabin. Shoes that you probably wore yourself to make footprints around a telephone booth."

She started toward him, lifting her hands, her greenish eyes half closed. With his bunched hand in his pocket, he gestured her back. She shrugged and sat down on the desk edge again.

"Why did you kill him?" he asked her.

"He was greedy." She lifted a hand to her cheek. "You know how Joe was."

"So you got tired of him slapping you around and pumped lead into him."

"I wouldn't kill a man for that." Her greenish eyes were mocking. "Joe got worried that things would be different here in the mountains if we got a new sheriff. He decided to sell out and made a deal behind our backs."

"He made the deal with a man named Riordan."

Allie Kemp nodded her red head. "Oh, yes. The letter you found at the Taggart house. Good thing we were following you."

Sam said, "Pick up the phone. Tell the operator to get you Dale Bascomb."

Her lips in the glow of a desk lamp looked moist and red. "Don't you want to hear the rest of it? How Joe sold all the equipment we had to store when Bascomb took Baldy Jefferson's beat up here? Sixteen thousand dollars Joe was getting away with. We chased him, but his car was too fast. He skidded into the lake. We backtracked and found him in the phone booth."

"I don't like getting rough with a woman. Pick up that phone!"

She slid off the desk. "There's enough money dropped up here in a year to take your breath away. Rich people like to gamble. There was enough take to buy anything—maybe even a new sheriff."

"The take was big enough for you to murder over it."

"Your friend Joe was scared. He had the money in hundred-dollar bills. And he was running out."

"I found two of the bills in the mud."

Quickly she stepped behind the desk. "Would you like to see what fifteen thousand eight hundred dollars looks like in cash?"

His heartbeat quickened and he made a dive for the phone on the desk. She was quicker. She had drawn a flat automatic from a desk drawer. She said, smiling coldly, "Don't you think I've been around long enough to know when a man has just his hand in his pocket—and no gun?"

Sam looked at the tense set of her handsome features, then slowly lifted his hand from his pocket. To someone behind Sam, she said, "It's all right now, bert."

Bert Lomax, clutching a rifle in a powerful hand, tracked mud into the office. "How you ever got out of that wreck, I'll never know." He eyed Sam coldly, but there was worry in his eyes.

"It was luck," Sam told him. "The kind of luck you won't have much longer." He was talking brave, but he was scared white. "You've put the fear in boys like Luke Delmar once too often."

Allie Kemp seemed to have lost her composure. "I don't like this, Bert. First Joe. Now—him."

"What else is there to do?" Bert Lomax said. "They'll find him beside his wrecked car." He sucked air into his lungs with a gusty sigh. "Fifteen years we been running games in these mountains. Nothing like this ever happened till that damned Joe Taggart came along."

CHAPTER V

BLEAK SHOWDOWN



SAM'S knees began to ache, he was that tense. He cocked his head, hearing a car pull in silently beside the building.

Lomax jerked aside the window shade. "It's all right, Allie," he said after a moment.

A man with bushy hair entered the room,

[Turn page]



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a man with steel-pointed eyes and a bulldog chin. It seemed tonight that there was more gray in his hair.

Sam said, "Hello, Matt."

Matt Crane leaned a shoulder against the wall. "I guess you know how it is, Sam."

Sam nodded, feeling his throat tighten.

Matt said, "Joe was different from you. He had a larcenous brain. When I told him that I handled all the news out of the mountains, Joe wanted to know why." He rubbed his heavy chin. "Didn't you ever wonder about things when you were on the *Inquirer*?"

"Not until tonight. I'm not very bright, I guess."

"In this life, Sam," Matt went on, "you learn to look out for yourself first. You see, Joe wanted to take over everything. I paid him a little cut and let him in on the deal when he found out how things stood up here. But he wasn't content to live quietly like me. He had to splurge. It was starting some talk." Matt Crane looked across the room at Allie Kemp. "Joe even wanted to steal Allie. She and I have been together a long time, Sam."

"I never knew about that."

"When you told me I'd never had a girl, that I didn't understand about those things, it hit home." Matt Crane's shoulders sagged. "No woman could stay away from Joe. So I don't blame Allie too much."

"How did you do it all these years, Matt, right under old man Hepplewaite's nose?"

"You learn to do those things. I like money. Not to throw away like Joe did, but to keep."

Sam was aware of the heavy stillness in the small room—Bert Lomax's flat, expressionless face; Allie Kemp, her hands clenched tight at her sides; and Matt Crane. How could you work for a guy like Matt, hunt with him and drink with him and still not know he was the big wheel behind the mountain rackets.

"You're framing Elsa for Joe's murder," Sam said stiffly.

"That wasn't my idea. That accidental death theory would have worked." Matt smiled coldly. "But when you and Bascomb

started to dig, I had to go along with the plan to hang it on Elsa." Seeing the pain on Sam's face, Matt added, "She's a pretty woman, Sam. They'll send her up for a few years, then she'll be out."

"And what about me, Matt?"

Matt lifted his blunt hands, then let them fall. "I like you, Sam. But you had to come back and be a policeman. You and Bascomb." His mouth tightened. "It's your neck or mine. Bert killed Joe, but in the eyes of the law we'll all be in it together, Allie and Bert and me—"

Something flickered against the window curtain. With an oath Matt Crane jerked it aside. In the distance could be seen a thin tongue of flame that glittered like candlelight far down the ravine. "His car is burning," Bert Lomax cried. "The ignition was on and it finally got to the gas—"

"Shut up!" Matt Crane thundered, jerking down the window shade. "We've got to hurry. You bungled this, Bert, by not making sure of the job when I phoned you to run him off the road."

"I done my best," Bert Lomax said.

"Supposing you finish it. And quick."

Matt turned his back.

No bullets in my body, Sam thought. Just a smashed head and my body found in the canyon beside my car.

LOMAX outweighed Sam by some thirty pounds and he meant to make good use of the advantage by finishing the job in one swift movement. He shifted his hands on the rifle, holding it like a club by the barrel. Sam flung up an arm to try and stop that downward smashing blow. The rifle stock struck him on the arm. There was the sound of snapping bone, and pain flooded through him.

He staggered back, his right arm flopping uselessly. Lomax lifted the rifle again. The heavy stock descended once more, aimed for the crown of Sam Willits' head.

Window glass tinkled, and a face appeared at the window—Dale Bascomb's face. A gun roared and Bert Lomax staggered. He turned slowly and fell to the floor.

"The rest of you," the deputy said through

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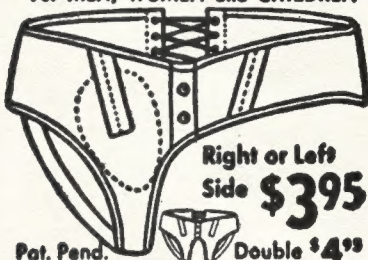


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the broken window, "don't move a muscle."

Sam couldn't have moved if he wanted to. The pain was spreading up his arm. He was dimly aware of another shot, of Allie Kemp's piercing scream. . . .

"It was the fire that did it," Dale Bascomb was saying as he fastened splints to Sam's broken arm. "Your car lay there a long time without burning. But the ignition finally set off the spilled gasoline. I spotted the flames."

Through his teeth, Sam said, "How did you know I'd be here?"

"You left a straight line of tracks in the mud, straight to Allie and Bert and Matt Crane."

"You were surprised about Matt?"

"No. I wasn't too surprised. Matt pulled a lot of strings to get me transferred. I figured there must have been a reason."

Sam bit his lips at the pain. "Matt got in so deep he couldn't get out. I guess that was the way it was." A thought occurred to Sam, and he added, "Where is Matt?"

"He put a gun muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger before I could reach him."

Sam felt nausea slug him. "And the woman and Lomax?"

"They're handcuffed in the next room. They'll stand trial."

"Joe thought of me when he was in trouble," Sam mumbled. "He always thought of me whenever he was in a jam."

"Better lie still," the deputy said as he tied the splints. "That arm is bad."

"Never mind the arm. Get me to Elsa."

"She's on her way up here with the ambulance." Bascomb looked away. "I'm sorry, Willits. I honestly thought she was guilty. Guess I've got a lot to learn about being a cop."

Sam raised up on his good elbow. "I'm taking Elsa away from here, Bascomb. You tell her that."

"Sure. I'll tell her." Bascomb might as well have saved his voice. Sam Willits was out cold.

Answers to Quiz on Page 83

1-g, 2-m, 3-h, 4-n, 5-k, 6-j, 7-i, 8-f, 9-c, 10-d,
11-b, 12-e, 13-a, 14-l.

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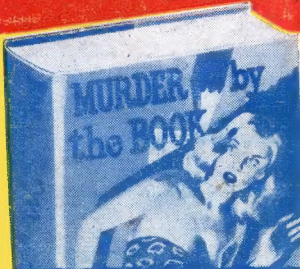
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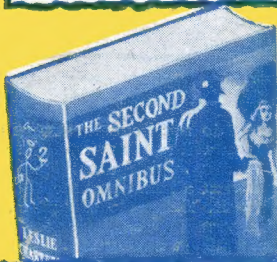
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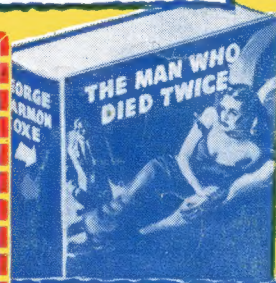
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